WARHAMMER
40,000
THE SILENT KING
A DAWN OF FIRE NOVEL
GUY HALEY

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For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the Master of Mankind. By the might of his inexhaustible armies a million worlds stand against the dark.

Yet, he is a rotting carcass, the Carrion Lord of the Imperium held in life by marvels from the Dark Age of Technology and the thousand souls sacrificed each day so his may continue to burn.

To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruelest and most bloody regime imaginable. It is to suffer an eternity of carnage and slaughter. It is to have cries of anguish and sorrow drowned by the thirsting laughter of dark gods.

This is a dark and terrible era where you will find little comfort or hope. Forget the power of technology and science. Forget the promise of progress and advancement. Forget any notion of common humanity or compassion.

There is no peace amongst the stars, for in the grim darkness of the far future, there is only war.

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THE SILENT KING

A DAWN OF FIRE NOVEL

GUY HALEY

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Roboute Guilliman – The Imperial Regent, the Avenging Son, the Last Loyal Son, the Returned and Sainted Primarch
Archmagos Dominus Belisarius Cawl – Prime Conduit of the Omnissiah
Maldovar Colquan – Stratarchis Tribune, Adeptus Custodes
Isaiah Khestrin – Fleetmaster
Illiyanne Natasé – Farseer, envoy of Eldrad Ulthran
Dho Gan Mey – Rear admiral, Navis Imperialis, Council Exterra

PARADYCE II RECLAMATION FORCE

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Marian – Palatine, the Order of the Argent Shroud, Gathalamor Preceptory
Trilthoilis – Captain, Rillian 398th Pioneers
Jelk – Lay preacher, Frateris militia
Shanni Saintsgift – Blessed daughter of the Emperor, Frateris militia

SERVANTS OF CAWL

Qvo-87 – Reconstituted friend
Alpha Primus – Unsanctioned experiment

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Darvian, the Lord VanLeskus – Husband to Cassandra

Vitrian Messinius – Captain, 10th Company, White Consuls/lord lieutenant Fleet Tertius Greyshields, acting commander Battle Group Jovian
Selwin – Mortal steward to the lord lieutenant
Thothven – Captain, First Battalion, Second Company, First Brotherhood of the Unnumbered Sons of Guilliman
Yuulk – Shipmaster, *Faith's Anvil*
Faey Balevolio – Navigator, *Faith's Anvil*
Tillanus – Epistolary, Second Company, First Brotherhood of the Unnumbered Sons of Guilliman
GonFeest – Epistolary, Second Company, First Brotherhood of the Unnumbered Sons of Guilliman
Artesian – Battle-brother, Second Company, First Brotherhood of the Unnumbered Sons of Guilliman
Allon – Greaser, kappa grease gang, *Faith's Anvil*
Oost – Greaser, kappa grease gang, *Faith's Anvil*
Filtz – Greaser, kappa grease gang, *Faith's Anvil*
Ivers – Greasemaster, kappa grease gang, *Faith's Anvil*
Golus – Greasemaster, kappa grease gang, *Faith's Anvil*

BATTLE GROUP IOLUS

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Finnula Diomed – First lieutenant and shipmistress, *Saint Aster*

ADEPTUS MECHANICUS

Q-Lint SpaForrix3 – Archmagos Dominus, Theta-19 (Explorator) Reclamator/Purgation cohort
Eph-Eph-9-Sigma-9 – Magos Logis
Tol – Skitarii Marshal
Camalin Hiax 43-Tau-Omicron – Magos Perscrutor
Chul-phi – Myrmidon-penitent
Osel-den – Sub-magos
89-7 – Datasmith
Visscher – Navigator, *Purity of Steel*
Zellopine – Mechasapient, Balor Prime Marshalling Yards

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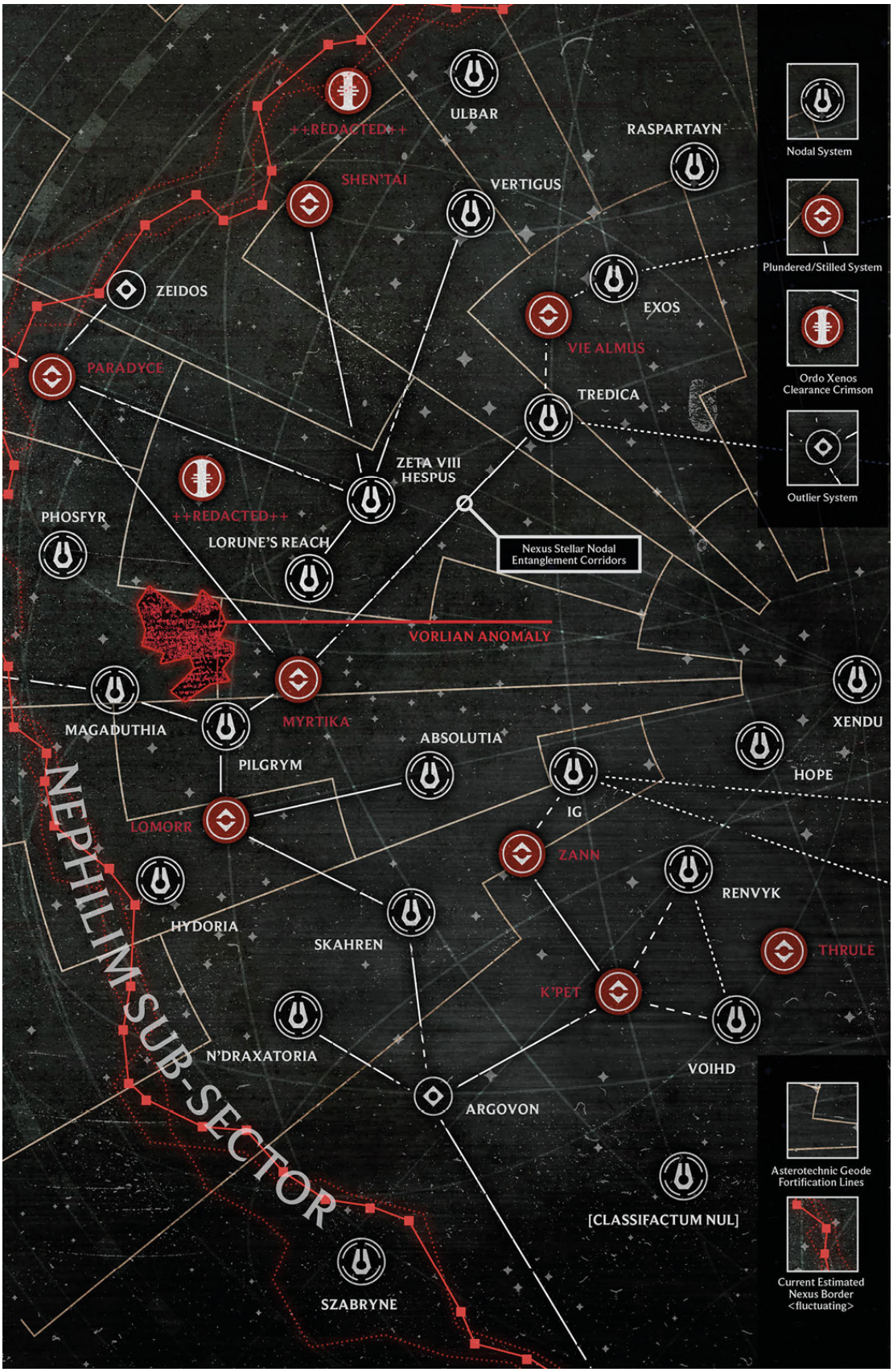
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Chapter One

PURGATION COHORT

ARCHMAGOS Q-LINT

RARE PRIZES

On a desolate world, two armies faced one another across a field of rock. On the hills around the plain, a hardy lichen analogue grew in sufficient amounts to lace the atmosphere with oxygen. It was the sole life form. The world was so insignificant it had a numeric code string in place of a name. It was possible it had once teemed with life. Now it did not. A large, solitary moon stared down askance, mourning what might have been. Arid, remote, too expensive and too bare of resources to be worth colonising, the planet would have held no interest for the Imperium of Man were it not for the xenos ruins cluttering the northern hemisphere.

They were not really ruins. That they should be thought so was an assumption long disproved. A few hundred years ago the designation had some justification. Ruins like them were encountered across the galaxy, just another tomb complex of vanished species 19342q8756/Kappa. The ruins would have been catalogued and plundered by one arm or another of the Imperium, and that would have been that. Many similar sites suffered the same fate, and doubtless all of them would have eventually, had their occupants not begun to stir.

Slowly, the growing list of vanished expeditions to such sites began to tell. Notice was taken. Larger forces were sent. Necrons, the xenos were called. Alien androids from the distant past. They were added to the list of threats already faced by the Imperium.

Yet the designation of their artefact worlds remained the same for a long time: xenos ruins, medium interest, common type. Threat level: low. Bureaucracy changes slowly.

Archmagos Dominus Q-Lint SpaForrix3, commander of the Theta-19 (Explorator) Reclamator/Purgation cohort, knew the threat. Since before the opening of the Cicatrix Maledictum, Q-Lint's role had been the discovery, exploitation and destruction of tomb complexes exactly like the one on this world. He had done so a great many times. He knew the xenos for what they were, as soulless, abominable intelligences, an affront to the Machine God. He despised them for it, and was efficient in their eradication.

On one side of the plain were Q-Lint's forces, the cybernetic soldiers of the Adeptus Mechanicus of Mars. They regarded the human species as the rightful rulers of the galaxy, as all humans, of whatever type, usually did.

On the other side of the plain, beneath a hemisphere of translucent green energy, stood a legion of necrons, recently revived. They also believed themselves to be the rightful rulers of the galaxy.

This made peaceful resolutions between the two species unlikely.

The humans regarded the necrons as abominations. Those necrons still capable of thought regarded the humans as inconsequential primitives. They stared with mutual hatred at one another across crumbled shale, through thin air hazy with dust, metal fingers upon triggers. Battle would start for certain, the only question was when. When it was done, one side would remain. The losers would be annihilated.

Neither side would admit it, but they were not so very different. Both were born from bipedal, bisymmetrical sentients of a roughly similar body plan. Both followed questionable gods. Both began by despising the weakness of flesh, and both followed, by different paths, a destiny that ended in the final replacement of flesh by machine. The necrons had completed that journey, the Adeptus Mechanicus were well on their way. Q-Lint could see the threat of the alien, but he could not see the irony that he was chasing their ultimate fate.

Deadly weapons hummed with pent-up energies. The humans outnumbered the necrons; the necrons were safe behind their power shield. Impasse.

For the moment, nothing moved.

It would not remain that way for long.

Archmagos Dominus Q-Lint SpaForrix3 looked out from his pulpit over the barrel of his abeyant's eradication beamer at the army of necrons. They had been issuing from the small tomb complex for hours. Now they were utterly still.

Altogether chilling, Q-Lint thought. Soulless, devoid of will or direction, how completely they have abandoned their souls. Imagine, he thought with disgust, giving up all vestiges of your sacred being, and imprisoning your mind in cold, unfeeling metal. They had sold their souls for a fool's immortality.

Q-Lint was taken with his musings. He felt a binary sonnet in the offing, so filed the thoughts away for later in the auxiliary mem-unit bolted to the side of the nine-legged abeyant.

<Prepare for data exchange,> he canted to his magi, marshal and others who made up his small but effective cohort command. Exploration-purgation did not suit hordes of personnel. He couldn't stand the administration needed to manage a multi-tiered hierarchy. If your input was three tech-priests with a common goal, it was said, the output was fifteen disputes and a murder.

<Observation – enemy unresponsive to self-evidently high threat levels,> Eph-Eph-9-Sigma-9 responded, also in the binharic high speech.

Q-Lint's forces were lined up as neatly as their foes. Skitarii vanguard units in the main, numbering several thousand, with the support of legged tanks and artillery, flyers and heavy servitor units. The usual complement for a mid-range purgation force, though he had a few little extras. He was particularly proud to count two dozen war automata of the Legio Cybernetica among his assets.

Nothing moved. Nobody spoke. Machines hummed. The wind blew.

<Observation logged,> said Q-Lint. <Widecast statement – less obvious data inputs welcome.>

<Xenos shield at one hundred per cent,> canted Marshal Tol. <Barrier impenetrable. Hard power field.>

<Primary task – remove xenos energy projection.> Q-Lint data-pulsed the Onager dunecrawlers that made up his back line.

The walker tanks obeyed immediately. High-energy neutron lasers burned through the air, making it crackle. Solid munitions slammed into the shield after them. The shield flared bright. He let the bombardment go on for over a minute.

‘That should do it,’ he said aloud, in the Lingua Technis, from the voxmitter in his chest. <Cease fire!> He widecast the order.

The attack ceased. Smoke blew away in ragged sheets. A line of glowing rock marked the boundary of the power field. Steam that smelled of burnt minerals rolled back towards the Adeptus Mechanicus lines.

Q-Lint had a profligate number of handsome ocular implants. He ran them up to maximum magnification and linked their feeds. A composite image formed in his mind of near-supernatural acuity.

Ancient, thin lips pursed. Nothing had got through. The necrons stood unaffected. No damage. Q-Lint’s leathery tongue poked out, and he grinned. Tol was right, it was a challenge, but Tol only saw things in military terms. It was also a fine prize. A hard power field of that size and impenetrability was rare. There were human examples, from the Dark Ages, though there were not many left at all. He had never seen one on a necron world.

He longed to get his manipulators on it, see how it ticked. His claws itched, literally itched. A residual synaptic illusion, since he had replaced his hands long ago with superior bionics, but the sensation was real enough.

<No penetration. Enemy still unresponsive.>

‘Yes, yes, thank you for that, Sigma-9,’ Q-Lint muttered. A few of his command cadre gave out beeps as they recorded the scene for posterity. An autoquill scratched over a scroll somewhere at the back of the group.

Q-Lint upped magnification further. The enemy seemed in poor repair, he thought. Many had slumped, crook-backed stances, their thin metal arms almost dragging on the ground. The glowing lights associated with necron technology were out on some of their weapons, suggesting malfunction. Some of the warriors missed jaws or hands. All were corroded.

Another sign of necron inferiority, he thought. Not the shield, that was an impressive example of transdimensional technology. The inferiority was the

mismatch of high technology guarding such broken-down automata. Tragic, really. They must have been a powerful race once. He almost pitied them.

He neglected to recall the ongoing war that gripped much of the Martian empire, the tombs waking under their feet, the endless legions of alien dead pouring into Adeptus Mechanicus facilities. The broken incursion into the Pariah Nexus. He put out of his mind that the Adeptus Mechanicus were losing in the Nephilim Sector and in all the sectors around it. He was obsessive, like many magi, focused on his small part of the picture, seeing only his successes on these far-out sentinel planets. He had his task; he would succeed, because he always did. He was proud of that. He forgot pride could be a double-edged sword.

His vision stopped upon the gate into the chief pyramid of the complex. The complex buildings looked natural, having been softened by the tides of time so that their forms were all but lost, and the glossy black of their finish abraded to a dull grey that looked no different to the rock of the world they had been built upon. But they were not native. A simple scan revealed that. *Necron presence minor*, it read. By his reckoning, the machines on the plain represented the whole of the garrison. This was a good target. He looked forward to the xenotech plunder it would yield.

<Necron forces show no sign of heightened response witnessed recently,> said Sigma-9. His specialisation was in higher-dimensional auguries, making him a useful fellow to have around.

Q-Lint's tactical prognostications ran:

<THREAT LEVEL: MINIMAL>

One after the other.

<THREAT LEVEL: MINIMAL>

<Habitual necron response to tomb world invasion is unthinking aggression.> He input new variables into his supplementary cortex. His cybernetic cogitator, also huge, sweating oil, and attached to the side of his carriage with large, unsightly bolts, hummed with effort. <Hypothesis – deterioration of command protocols. Provide state of enemy carrier wave.>

<Carrier wave strong and steady. Protocol efficiency unclear.>

<Provide scan of potential dimensional breach points,> Q-Lint commanded. <Provide scan of higher-form manipulation of carrier wave.>

Sigma-9 was quiet for a significant sliver of a second. 'Undetectable,' he said aloud. He sounded unsure. Transdimensional mechanics was an

uncertain discipline. The Adeptus Mechanicus were familiar with the warp, and to a lesser extent with the webway which existed between the materium-immaterium, but the strange intra-dimensional non-places the necrons exploited were a frightening mystery. Even the mathematics that underlaid them was capricious, as if they were alive and responsive somehow, praise the Machine God for the richness of His Great Work, Q-Lint thought. He initiated an auto-prayer cycle to atone for his lapse in respectful awe. Such puzzles were the Machine God's way of testing the faithful. He had no right to be irritated by them.

'Hypothesis – are they malfunctioning?'

'Perhaps they are waiting,' Sigma-9 suggested.

'For what?'

'Unknown.'

'Necron constructs do not wait,' said Q-Lint. 'They attack and purge, as we attack and purge. That is what they always do, unless there are higher forms present to provide alternative orders. I query again, are there higher forms?'

'Unclear. They must be under obscure programming.'

'Unsatisfactory, Sigma-9.'

'My data is unclear.'

'Then get me better data!'

'Magos.' Q-Lint's translexer, Rovol, spoke up.

Q-Lint turned his head towards him. The gears of his neck mounting clicked unhappily. This was an unpleasantly dusty place.

'There is a blanket hold-signal keeping them in place, but it has the characteristics of an automated broadcast, not sentient control. There is none of the complexity associated with the xenos noosphere when one of the higher forms is in the field.'

'Interesting,' Q-Lint said. 'See, Sigma-9, Rovol performs your function better than you do.'

Rovol emanated a microwave burst of satisfaction.

'This is a puzzle, and no mistake,' said Q-Lint. 'However, I judge the situation suitable to begin attack. Marshal Tol, please ensure maximum fire overlap is established. Power up the frame stabilisers. If there are hidden gates here, the enemy will not be using them. Additionally, the threat of

denial of inter-dimensional transit should provoke the garrison, and they will drop their shield to attack our position.'

'The frame stabilisers only have forty-two minutes of operational time before burn-out,' Sigma-9 warned.

'Query-suggestion – perhaps we should withdraw until Magos Hiax has completed his task? Primary goal remains acquisition of xenotech.'

The whole of Q-Lint's command cadre turned to look at Rovol.

The lexmechanic was perturbed by this sudden attention.

'I only mean to say we may be better allowing Hiax to complete his task in peace, then you may dispose of the abominations at your leisure, exalted one. Why provoke them at all before the vault is open?'

'You are too timid,' said Q-Lint. 'The Machine God is with us. It is our holy duty to obliterate the xenos and return their constituent elements to the Great Work, so that they might be made anew into something less… distasteful. We annihilate them now.'

Numbers and designations scrolled through the portions of Q-Lint's imagination co-opted by his memcores. He was growing more certain that there was nothing tricky here. The soulless ones had arranged themselves in diamond phalanxes, as if they were preparing to fight a battle of spear and shield. Larger creations stood between them, multi-limbed islands in a sea of metal, but these were only the necrons' tomb guardians and maintenance automata, none of their dedicated war engines, and they were as run down as the warriors.

'Hiax can work just as well while we fight,' Q-Lint said dismissively. 'Sigma-9, signal FD-10 and order him to prepare the fleet for sub-orbital bombardment. He has to get in close. It has to be accurate.' Q-Lint did not use FD-10's rank or any of his many honorifics. It was widely agreed Q-Lint held other magi in contempt.

At that moment, the wave fronts of the frame stabilisers overlapped around Q-Lint, then the field spilled across the plain, slow as cold oil. Harmonic patterns established, the field strengthened. When it reached the shield, it provoked the enemy as Q-Lint had hoped.

The shield winked out of existence. The line of battered machines lurched into motion. A rhythmic crunching began as they marched across the friable rock in sinister, exact lockstep.

'Begin the attack, Marshal Tol,' Q-Lint commanded.

‘As you command, most favoured among sapients,’ Tol said.

‘Sigma-9, signal Hiax. Tell him to be quick.’

‘Now?’ Sigma-9 asked. ‘I shall have to divert cogitator resources from deep-scan interpretation to break through their noospheric cage in order to deliver the–’

‘Yes, now! Do it now!’

‘As you command, master of motive forces,’ Sigma-9 muttered.

Sigma-9 made sorry whoops and pings as bits of himself were retasked. Down the line strode Marshal Tol, his data-squirts picked up by his accompanying signum-accantae and blurted via widecast to the army of cyborgs.

Now it was the turn of the forces of Mars to take a unified step forward.

Machine spirits, glutted with power and desperate for release, screamed with ecstasy as their firing mechanisms were given permission to unleash their energies into the ranks of the necrons.

The aliens were swift in responding.

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Chapter Two

MODUS PENITENTIAL

CRYPTOLOCK

HOSTILES

Deep underground, in a small chamber of shining black stone, Magos Perscrutor Camalin Hiax 43-Tau-Omicron {modus: penitential} was moving with the exaggerated care of a man doing something exceptionally difficult.

‘I am commencing a second pass at the cryptolock, stand by,’ he said, and data-pulsed a command for total silence, though none of his small retinue of magi were making any sort of noise, whether through the simple vibration of air, or upon the electromagnetic waves that made up their tightly woven uniclade noosphere. Those still with lungs were not even breathing. But Hiax was taking no chances. Sub-Magos Osel-den froze. Datasmith 89-7 commanded her data hounds to complete stillness. Even Myrmidon-Penitent Chul-phi dropped the power output of his reactor to avoid disturbing the subtle airs of the datasphere.

Before Hiax, the sixteen multi-faceted shapes of the cryptolock moved around on sharply defined tracks, so perfectly aligned that the black, glossy surfaces of the blocks slid past each other less than an atom’s width apart. The tracks were not visible. A less learned human would say the blocks

danced on thin air, but that was ignorant. The movements of the cryptolock blocks were mechanical, despite the esoteric sciences behind them.

They were not safe to be around. The blocks would not be halted. Hiax had direct experience of their immovable nature. An unwise gesture while establishing the perimeter of the lock's particle barrier had cost him the manipulator on one of his mechadendrites. The severed end of the mechanical tentacle fizzled, putting out an occasional blue spark of motive force. Even the Machine God's spirit incarnate looked feeble compared to the hard green glow emanating from the lock's circuit grooves.

The moment stretched. The explorators remained motionless. Hiax was fully engaged with his internal cyphers. Numbers cascaded through his cogitators, presenting him with a solution to the first phase alignment.

The numbers stopped. A seven-dimensional diagram took their place.

'I have it.'

Osel-den and 89-7 dared to breathe again. The hounds jerked back to life, clicking about on their spindly legs.

<There are nine to the power of twenty-three possible combinations,> 89-7 datacast. She rarely used her human voice, and it had atrophied to the point of inaudibility as a result. Her three data hounds suckled uneasily at the control podium near the antechamber entrance, monitoring the alien infosphere. They did not like their work.

'Are you saying I don't have the solution?' Hiax said. He was testy and worried what disaster Q-Lint's bull-headed confrontation with the tomb garrison would provoke.

Stay calm, he warned himself. He recalibrated his internal humours with infusions of synthetic chemicals and initiated a cerebral wash to reduce his tiredness. His four legs adjusted themselves yet held his torso absolutely still. Micro-pistons gave off tiny gasps of noble gases that were immediately recaptured and recycled. He was very well engineered.

<I am saying that you might find it difficult to open the vault with the solution you have acquired,> 89-7 input tactfully.

'A redundant sentiment, datasmith. It is self-evident that it is difficult. With the greater challenge comes the greater reward. That is why we are here,' Hiax murmured. *Not because Grand Sapient Magos Tessiricon found out about your little side interest in alien technology, oh no,* Hiax thought bitterly. They were all there as punishment. They never forgot that for long.

He moved his hands over the blocks, as close as one could get without actually touching them. On his left wrist he wore a bulky device back-engineered from necron parts. The necrodermis housing was blackened by the effects of breaking it. Cables ran from the rear to a secondary generator upon his back, also of xenos derivation, which would be activated only when necessary. He did not wish to rush this. Behind the cryptolock was a promising vault.

Q-Lint should not have put his forces down. If there was one thing that was guaranteed to wake the xenos from their slumber, it was arriving in force. Hiax had insisted this should be an infiltration mission, but as 89-7 pointed out, Hiax was rarely heeded, and Q-Lint had his own goals, with their own time pressures. Nobody, anywhere, ever, had enough time.

'We must act. I am ready,' he said. 'Verify and prepare.'

89-7 stiffened. Her augmetic eyes flashed with rapid data exchange. <Magos, your solution is imperfect. I recommend a recalculation.>

'What is the accuracy of the solution?' Sub-Magos Osel-den asked.

'Ninety-eight point three per cent.'

'That will suffice, surely, puissant master?' he asked Hiax.

<A lot can be lost in one point seven per cent,> canted 89-7.

'You are too cautious, datasmith,' said Osel-den.

<Where data is concerned, it is my role to be cautious,> 89-7 said.

Omnissiah, their endless bickering, Hiax thought. 'Just engage the solution!'

89-7 began emitting the rhythmic pulses of a necron carrier wave. Hiax activated the xenos reactor on his back. It was an ugly mix of Imperial and xenos tech. No grace to it, and heretical into the bargain. Effective, though.

Hiax raised his left hand. The device upon it shivered into life. Its emanations were unpleasant on his spiritus machina. He rerouted the sensation, storing it in his memcore for later analysis. For the moment he did not care to feel it.

<Solution exloading now,> 89-7 said.

Hiax could not do this on his own. Necron technology was xenos technology, and therefore unclean in the eyes of the Machine God. But that did not make it inferior.

Only by using the ways of the foe could the foe be defeated. All technology stemmed from the Machine God. It was idiocy to ignore such

bounty simply because it had not been crafted by human hands. It was a means to an end, and that end was understanding. Most sects within the Cult didn't see it that way, however, which was why he'd been exiled in the first place. Their hypocrisy made him seethe: Tessiricon and the rest of the higher magi of Ryza, denouncing him for his use of xenos arts, then sending him down here where his so-called blasphemous skills would be of the most use. Naturally, they were harvesting his data. They condemned him with one manipulator while snatching the fruits of his labour with the other.

Oh, how he hated them.

Concentrate, he told himself. *Calm. Hate is a block on the route to understanding.* The lock required more than one mind to break. 89-7 and her hounds were in the rigid trance of deep data communion. He needed to be as focused as her.

'Activating interface,' he said. 'Follow my lead, continue broad sphere modelling. Anticipate counter-moves. No surprises, 89-7,' he warned. Hiax moved his hand in a precise pattern. The device on his arm allowed him to exercise some of the power of the necrons themselves. They had the ability to influence the materium directly via their complex multidimensional sciences. He did not understand how it worked, not completely, but he did know that they encoded various shortcuts into the very stuff of reality, enabling them to set in train complex chains of cause and effect, mediated by their nanotechnology and dimensional technology, by simply gesturing in the air. To the untrained eye, it looked a lot like sorcery.

The first glyph fluoresced into being before him. Three of the blocks reacted to his command, their logic tracks blazing. Their orientations changed, the blocks swivelling on multiple axes. The grooves locked. The stone flowed together. The light shone brighter. The locked blocks switched path, moving as one now, and the groove patterns on the rest changed.

'Primary phase completed. Initiating secondary phase,' Hiax said. '89-7, continue to anticipate attack-code and trap routines.'

He drew another glyph next to the second. He was almost entirely machine himself, but Hiax lacked the perfect control of the higher necron forms. The glyph came out a little shaky, and quivered a moment before stabilising. That was too close to failure, but the blocks responded again. Two more united.

'Remarkable, great one,' breathed Osel-den.

‘Your sycophancy is appreciated but there are eleven more stages to go, so remain quiet, sub-magos,’ said Hiax. ‘Initiating third phase.’

With the next glyph, four blocks joined, then these joined to the pair. The puzzle neared completion.

‘Still think I’ve got it wrong, 89-7?’ Hiax asked. The datasmith was too far into noospheric fugue to reply.

The chamber trembled.

‘What was that?’ Osel-den asked nervously. He looked up at the ceiling. Somewhere nearby they heard the breaking sugar-crackle of noctilith fracturing. ‘Are they bombarding the shield?’

‘They’d better not be,’ said Hiax. With subtle motions of his fingers, he input the fourth pattern into the weft of the world. More blocks joined. Some of those that had melded earlier switched position and their logic grooves altered configuration.

Another shudder ran through the complex.

‘That felt like it hit the hillside!’ Osel-den said.

‘Q-Lint could never shoot straight,’ said Hiax. He paused in his labours as the ground trembled and the fused blocks shuttled around and around in front of them, cold green fires glinting from the magi’s enhancements. The glyphs wavered like candles.

The ground ceased its movement.

‘I believe they have stopped, masterful lord of explorations,’ Osel-den said.

‘Very well,’ said Hiax. He came close to sighing with relief. Such an organic response! He needed to get a hold of himself. ‘Continue.’

The fifth and sixth glyphs were input. The lock switched about again, and again. A regular throbbing set up somewhere. A strange and unsettling watchfulness pressed in from the stone. The quality of the atmosphere changed, charged with power. A spark leapt from Chul-phi’s lower arms.

Those bits of Hiax that were still capable of sweating did so freely.

He was preparing the seventh symbol when the chamber shook again. A barely audible note, like a chime, sounded from the ceiling. A crack appeared in the facing, inviolate for millions of years, broken in a moment. Small shards, sharp as flints, pattered to the ground.

Somewhere, deep within the complex, energy signatures shone.

Chul-phi stirred. The ancient energy weapons bonded to his shoulders hummed up to ready status. He let out one staccato burst of machine speech.

<Danger.>

‘Contact the surface, find out what is going on, Osel-den, and don’t even consider discharging those weapons in here, Chul-phi!’ Hiax said. The situation was getting away from him. He felt faint. The drain on his power systems was considerable. Despite his enthusiasm for knowledge, the touch of the xenotech left him unclean, and he still had several glyphs to go.

‘Compliance, masterful one,’ Osel-den said. A faraway look came over the sub-magos as he initiated contact with Q-Lint’s command cadre.

The chamber shook violently. Two more cracks raced up the walls and across the ceiling. That level of disturbance was too much for the cryptolock. The pieces ceased moving, bonding themselves into an immovable wall. The wavering glyphs Hiax had so painstakingly etched onto reality’s skin wavered and vanished like smoke.

‘Omnissiah blast them! What are they doing? I’m locked out! Throne and cog curse it all!’

89-7 staggered as the data communion abruptly broke. Her data hounds leapt back from the control dais, squealing electronically, wrenching out their altered input spikes. The lights in the necron logic grooves went out, plunging the explorators into darkness.

Hiax turned on his stablights. Where the brilliant yellow hit the walls, the noctilith looked dead.

Osel-den came out of his comms trance. His eyelids clicked when he blinked.

‘And?’ Hiax prompted.

‘We are to be speedy in our efforts.’

They all looked at the fused cryptolock.

<Bloody fool,> Hiax canted, and a good deal more besides. He shared his opinion of the archmagos with his group freely, his indiscretion hidden behind triple layers of hexaric encryption. ‘I told him he should not put down here. Leave it to the experts!’

‘Meaning you, wise lord,’ said Osel-den.

‘Yes, meaning me!’ snapped Hiax. ‘He was never going to accomplish anything by coming down here in person, and now look what has happened.

He’s too greedy for glory.’

‘You nearly accomplished the task, wise and potent magos,’ said Osel-den.

‘Are you set on flattery today?’ Hiax said. He ran his lights over the solid mass of the lock. Nobody was getting into the vault now. That made him extremely unhappy.

‘My apologies. I meant to say if only Q-Lint had paid heed to your expertise,’ said the sub-magos.

‘You know I said you and I would never be friends, Osel-den?’

‘Yes, magos.’

‘I still mean it. All of you, disengage. This is a loss. Prime the chamber for destruction.’

‘Fusion flasks? How many?’ Osel-den asked.

‘All of them,’ said Hiax. ‘I want to be sure. If we can’t have whatever is in there, I will not leave it for the xenos.’ He looked back at the vault. ‘Failure. All for the sake of a few minutes of restraint.’

‘You do not know if Q-Lint initiated hostilities.’

‘He did.’

‘There are plenty more necron worlds in this sector, magos.’

Hiax thought a moment, short-range augurs playing on the vault door. No return. ‘Yes, there are,’ he said thoughtfully. ‘Worrying, isn’t it?’

Something shifted deeper inside the complex. A clicking noise echoed slyly down the way.

‘Hostiles,’ Osel-den said, as if that should be a surprise.

‘Of course there are hostiles. The tomb guardians are active. Melta bombs, now!’

They emerged from the entrance passage onto a hillside a few hundred feet above the plain. The whole slope was pocked by identical doors, each with monumental, sloped jambs and heavy lintels. Every one was an enticement to discover the secrets within. None would now be explored.

The adepts had a camp around the entrance. A couple of awnings over universal storage crates, some unpacked, small amounts of surveying machinery laid out on a table. Five servitors waited silently for Hiax’s return. Twenty yards away, the clade’s lander sat on the roof of a buried tomb, jutting out from the slope. Hiax activated the servitor clade, bidding them to collect the equipment and load the lander. Hiax then sent another

pulse to Osel-den, ordering him to contact the *Purity of Steel* and have it prepare to depart as soon as they were back on board.

For once, Osel-den did not question his orders, nor did he lay on the flattery either. Chul-phi covered the door.

On the plain at the foot of the hill, battle raged.

Q-Lint's forces engaged the enemy at close range. Human cyborgs and undying androids traded fire with the most appalling weapons. Skitarii units operating under their own direction sheltered in the lee of boulders from roaring streams of gauss-fire, sniping when they could. Others stood in unthinking ranks, bodies co-opted by their leaders and placed under direct control, unleashing round after round of radium bullets, blind to the casualties they were suffering. The necrons marched forward, equally unthinking, also dying, firing to their own alien patterns. Coherent spears of energy slashed through the air, leaving after-images burnt onto eyes and ocular sensors alike, slamming into the advancing phalanxes of necrons on one side, rending machine component from augmented human on the other. Explosions burst from shining metal where the beams connected. Radioactive rounds cracked into exotic alloys, sending heavy alien constructs crashing down. Beams of violent green energy, braided like lightning, stabbed back, stripping men-machines down to gory, steaming lumps of junk. Martian Onager walker tanks fired high-energy volleys at their enemy. Tall, multi-legged necron tomb-guard constructs stalked through the melee, particle whips slicing down into the Mechanicus ranks, who responded with tight patterns of fire. The sky glinted with swarms of insectile necron drones that swooped and dived in deadly murmurations.

'Is he advancing? He's not advancing, surely,' Hiax said half to himself. 'Why didn't he hold, let them blunt themselves on his guns?'

'There is not much art to this confrontation, cunning data master,' said Osel-den.

It annoyed Hiax that the sub-magos had been listening in, more so that he felt confident enough to comment.

'Ah, you are now an expert on military tactics?' Hiax said, although Osel-den was right. The two sides had simply lined up against each other.

'I do not need to be an expert. There is no sense to this. To the death, for what purpose?'

'Arrogance,' Chul-phi opined. He had a voice like a misfiring engine.

‘Did he actually speak?’ said Osel-den.

‘Yes,’ said Hiax. ‘He did.’

They looked at Chul-phi. His face had been stripped back to the skull and was studded with augmetics, and therefore remained inscrutable.

‘Time to finish the work here. Safe distances, everyone,’ Hiax ordered.

The magi retreated. 89-7’s data hounds skulked around her bionic legs.

Hiax blew the fusion charges in the vault antechamber with a vindictive mind-pulse. There was a sustained roaring from below, as if crazed, burrowing monsters did battle in the bowels of the planet. It grew closer, louder, and plumes of superheated gas roared out of three tomb entrances. Vaporised rock, burnt noctilith, necrodermis, whatever had been down there was gasified and vented. Melta charges generated temperatures that briefly exceeded those found at the heart of stars. Nothing could survive that.

Their robes wafted in the backwash. Hot gravel pinged off their augments.

‘Satisfying,’ said Osel-den.

A tremendous detonation drew their attention back down to the plain. The eradication beams of three Onager crawlers intersected on one of the necron support constructs. The thing – Hiax had no idea what its purpose was – went down with a keening, multispectral wail that made the magi’s receptors buzz. The necrodermis of the construct burst around the middle, shrivelled back, burned into atoms and less-than-atoms by the wrath of the Machine God. The machine’s top half fell, all flailing arms, its energy cannon firing wildly skywards, then it toppled onto the unfeeling legions beneath it. The legs tottered forward a few steps and crashed down, spewing green plasma. The reactor housing was compromised. A microsecond later the whole thing went up like a tactical atomic, flattening necrons and Mechanicus skitarii for hundreds of feet around.

There was a pause as the dust cleared. Nothing moved in that part of the battlefield for a few seconds, though combat continued elsewhere. On the necron side of the field, to Hiax’s left, the whole surface seemed to stir. Severed limbs crawled back towards their owners. Extinguished eyes reignited, burning again with cold ghost fires. Metal unbent and flowed, sharp shards pulling themselves together to remake the unmade. The undying machines staggered to their feet, dragging up weapons from the ground. Those that did not get up shimmered and faded from view. Sigma-

9’s equipment roared with static as they vanished, despite the Adeptus Mechanicus’ frame stabilisers.

The children of Mars had their own methods of immortality. Skitarii twitched on the ground as their circuitry rerouted itself past damaged subsystems, and a portion of them got back up again too. They did so more jerkily than the necrons, and in lower numbers. Their limbs did not reattach. Their rebirth was altogether less effective. Hiax wondered again if the Cult really was superior in any way to these horrifying, eternal robots.

Then the two sides were shooting each other again.

‘Loading complete,’ one of the servitors relayed, flatly disinterested in everything going on around it.

The fight below was reaching a crescendo. Neither the tomb garrison nor the explorator force was particularly large. The Mechanicus had the edge in numbers, the necrons the edge in resilience. For the moment the adepts of Mars appeared to have the upper hand.

‘I suppose Q-Lint thinks he will win,’ said Osel-den.

‘He might win,’ said Hiax.

Osel-den checked his instruments. ‘I do not see any higher forms. You may be correct.’

‘Let’s not stay to find out if we’re right. We are not a military unit. Our task here was interrupted and our skills are best deployed elsewhere,’ said Hiax. He glanced back at the tomb entrances. Whatever they had woken down below had not yet emerged. ‘We are leaving.’

The servitors stamped up into the lander and headed for their flight cradles in the hold. Hiax followed up the side of the tomb, mounting stone steps that despite their great age still sported sharp edges.

Chul-phi emitted a warning.

‘Movement,’ he vocalised. Two actual words in one day was remarkable for the myrmidon. His guns locked on to something they could not see.

Worried, 89-7 sent her data hounds racing back onto the ship.

‘Wraiths?’ Hiax asked. He allowed his upper arms to unfold, and activated the pair of short-range plasma casters that tipped them. He’d found in the last few years that broad-spread, powerful weapons were an asset in the tunnels of tomb worlds.

<Affirmative,> Chul-phi canted. He continued tracking.

Osel-den drew his gun. His informatic output trembled with fear. ‘Omnissiah save me, I hate wra…’

The cough of a discharging volkite chewed off the end of Osel-den’s complaint. Chul-phi made up for a lack of conversational skill with a selection of potent weaponry and a keen aim. His shot hit something as it phased into being, smashing it to smoking pieces that bounced all over the slope. Before the last of it had come to rest, it was trying to remake itself. Chul-phi had as much experience at fighting the necrons as the rest of them, and he was already shooting into the scattered pieces. The central section rolled, pushing at the ground with its surviving manipulators, trying to scuttle away. Chul-phi stamped down hard on its twitching spine, pinning it into place, at the same time activating his power axe. He swung. Trailing disruptor fire, the axe head fell, and hit, blasting the top of the machine into pieces.

It stopped moving after that.

Chul-phi turned, and marched towards the others.

‘Danger,’ he said.

Osel-den looked around the group nervously. ‘Don’t these things usually come in threes?’

As soon as he spoke, two more wraiths phased up out of the ground, one emerging right beneath 89-7. The unfortunate datasmith experienced complete dismemberment as the machine solidified inside her, ripping her apart from within. She exploded everywhere, showering blood, oil, bone and metal in a circle six yards wide.

Osel-den gave out a peculiar whimper as a slab of her flesh hit him in the face.

‘Osel-den!’ Hiax shouted.

‘Urrrghhh,’ the sub-magos said. His pistol fell from nerveless hands. He wiped weakly at his bloodied face, and stared in horror at his fingers.

‘By the Omnissiah, get down!’

Some part of the sub-magos must have been listening, for he fell forward gracelessly exactly as the second wraith struck at him. The broad, flat beam of its particle caster cut through the space where his head had just been. Chul-phi let fly with his volkite, but he was hit in the side by the third xenos machine as he did, and the shot went wide, nearly striking Hiax in the face.

<Watch your fire,> the magos canted, loosing off his own response. Cone-shaped blasts of plasma roared from his emitters, short-ranged but deadly. They engulfed the second construct, turning half its whipping tail to slag and divesting it of sundry claws. Unfortunately, it had several more. Oselden caught a touch of the blast, and his robes burst into flame. He screamed. The wraith screeched. Hiax ran back down from the open lander ramp, recharging his plasma casters and commanding the ship to open fire with its anti-personnel las-arrays at the same time. Brief flicks of blue las-light stabbed around the hillside. Chul-phi was wrestling with the other wraith, one bionic arm wrapped around its squirming, anvil-flat head. The myrmidon must have had some sort of field stabiliser tucked away in his belligerent innards, because the wraith could not phase. Its claw was stuck fast in the myrmidon's side, not to any noticeable effect, and Chul-phi was slamming it repeatedly in its collection of ocular lenses with one large fist. The fist had no disruption field or other advanced means of destruction, but metal striking metal hard could be quite effective, thought Hiax, as he watched the lenses burst, and the face of the construct cave in.

Meanwhile, the third wraith was crawling away. Its contra-grav unit was spitting green fire. Every time it tried to take flight, it fluttered up like a crippled bird, and crashed back down, but already its necrodermis was flexing, repairing what it could, covering over what it could not with seamless metal skin, its broken limbs snapping back into place.

Hiax was not going to allow that. He raised the arm equipped with the stolen necron technology, and reached out to it, accessing the carrier signal that commanded the things, intending to shut it down or turn it upon its fellow.

Across the invisible spaces of the universe, his command sprang. The effect was immediate, and not what he wanted.

The wraith rose up antagonised, tail remnant thrashing. It half-flew, half-jumped at Hiax. The light from the device bonded to the magos' lower left arm shivered, the burned black necrodermis cleared, and the nibbling, stinging sensation of hostile code assailed Hiax's innermost being. His arm developed a life of its own. Where he sought to control the wraith, it now controlled him.

Sub-optimal, he thought to himself. Already his defences were rallying, data-phages pushing back at the alien invasion, keeping it confined to the

arm. He commanded the socket that joined that arm to his body to disengage. It would not.

The wraith was a couple of yards away. His own hand reached up to throttle him. He grabbed it desperately about the wrist with his right hand and his mechadendrites. By intention his arm was brutally strong, but now he regretted the perfection of its design. He had never thought to be fighting it himself.

The wraith writhed into a coil and sprang at him again. Hiax leapt to the side. The wraith flew overhead, smashing into the ground with such force that one of its claws was wrenched free.

His arm continued to try to kill him, yanking itself loose to grab at one of his plasma limbs as he opened fire. The gun grabbed by his left arm vented spectacularly into the sky. The other hit the wraith full-on.

Metal burnt. The wraith's necrodermis held for a fraction of a second, then was boiled away. Bits of molten alloy splattered everywhere, setting solid on the rock. Keening wildly, the wraith swept off to the side. But it was not dead, not yet, and twisted about to return fire. Its particle wave encountered Hiax's refractor field. The exotic nature of the weapon caused the shield to react bizarrely, and an actinic glare dazzled them both.

Hiax's arm was coming for his neck again.

With his right hand, Hiax drew his power knife and sliced off his rebellious limb. The assault code continued to attack, the stump twitched, but he had no time to deal with the power unit the enemy was using to reach inside him. Instead, he fought back the code, then fired again, though the heat indicators on the caster screamed warnings at him. Both streams engulfed the wraith. It did not die, so he fired again. That finally finished the construct. The wraith spread out over the hillside in a blast of energy, half-melted components and yet more droplets of metal. Obligingly, its smoking carcass showed no sign of getting up again.

Squealing madly, his casters vented superheated coolant in huge clouds. Hiax barely got the angle correct to keep the jets away from himself and stop the gas from cooking his last few organic components.

He might even have died. That upset him.

The coolant dispersed.

Osel-den was singed but alive. Chul-phi was busy cutting free the last of the wraith with a phase knife Hiax had not known the myrmidon possessed.

The man was a wonder of death-dealing artefacts. 89-7 was dead and, by the looks of her shattered corpse, completely unsalvageable.

They looked at each other.

Osel-den canted a dense stream of locational data. There was movement beneath them, everywhere on the hill.

‘This area was supposed to be clear!’ the sub-magos said with his natural voice, which was full of a detestable panic.

‘The Machine God does not arrange His universe for your benefit, sub-magos,’ Hiax said. He wrenched off the necron power unit and tossed it away. It would be a while before he tried something like that again. He’d lost an arm, a claw, his datasmith and his xenotech. This was not a good day.

They boarded the ship. The take-off cycle began before the ramp had closed. The battle was still restricted to the ground, lucky for them, and they attained escape velocity untroubled by necron aircraft.

Air attenuated. The sky grew black. The void approached.

89-7’s data hounds skittered around the passenger bay, mournfully canting for their mistress. Hiax settled into his carriage, and poked at his ruined arm. He’d not managed a clean cut.

Osel-den leaned forward. ‘Let not the faithful dabble in the false practices of the xenos, for corruption and death are sure to follow.’

Hiax looked up sharply. ‘Do you know, Osel-den, quoting scripture is not particularly helpful right now.’

‘I only wished to–’

‘I’ll be more direct. Shut up, Osel-den.’

Osel-den shut up.

Twenty minutes later, they were out of the world’s thin envelope of air, and on their way back to the *Purity of Steel*.

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Chapter Three

WAR ON THE GROUND

CYBERNETICA

AN OFFER OF SURRENDER

‘Magos Hiax has departed the battlesphere, exalted one,’ Rovol informed Q-Lint.

The omnicarriage warmed with the firing of the eradicator. Q-Lint shared the machine spirit’s excitement through the communion sockets.

‘Success?’

‘He reports no success, my lord. The vault was close to giving up its secrets and then…’ Rovol looked away, his transmissions dense with algorithms of discomfort. ‘He was quite… uncensored in his response.’

‘You mean he blames me for his incompetence.’

‘Indeed, exalted one.’

‘Then we shall take the vault by force.’

Rovol switched his mode of communication, and his cant dropped to a digital murmur.

<Negative: vault existence = 0>

The battlefield whited out as a high-yield plasma shell hit the necron backline and exploded in a perfect hemisphere of boiling energy.

‘I see. Hiax treads dangerously close to the line of modus insubordination. I should datastrip his memcore and consign his spirit to oblivion. This is not the first time he has insulted me.’

‘He is incorrigible, my lord,’ Sigma-9 chimed in.

‘But useful,’ Rovol said.

‘For the moment.’ Q-Lint examined the casualty figures. Things were going well. ‘His behaviour is of no concern. We are on the cusp of victory. Sigma-9, status of the necron carrier wave?’

‘Compromised, exalted one,’ Sigma-9 said proudly. ‘We have inflicted critical damage upon their constructs. Command efficiency is deteriorating. The enemy will soon be in disarray.’

Q-Lint did not need to see the proof of this with his own eyes, he had far better senses than mere ocular organs, but he looked up from the displays crowding him anyway to savour his coming victory. Necron warriors were down in large numbers. The majority of their constructs were so much dismembered scrap. The entire army was falling back on ever-more predictable combat routines. Across much of their line, necron warriors were retreating. It was almost balletic. For every step the necrons took back, the skitarii advanced the same number. The air buzzed with radiation from expended radium rounds.

‘Excellent,’ he said. ‘Now is the time. Signal the datasmiths of the Legio Cybernetica. They may begin their assault.’

‘With pleasure, my lord,’ Sigma-9 said.

The moment the order was canted, Q-Lint was hit by a protest from Marshal Tol. No doubt he wished his warriors to slay the last of the enemy mechanisms. Tol was an ambitious man. He had no standing within the Cult order, but combat-focused laypersons such as Tol could advance far if they were sufficiently successful. Q-Lint could not allow him to claim credit for victory here. Let the automata perform the final role, let them take the glory. This had to be Q-Lint’s victory, not Tol’s. An archmagos dominus needed to be able to play off the various sects within the faith against one another, or else their own advancement would suffer.

Besides, he did so love to see the kastelans fight.

The four maniples activated simultaneously. There were only small variations in their movements as weapons spooled up and motivators engaged. Then they began to move in thrilling synchronicity. For a second

or so Q-Lint could hear the shrill hymns of the datasmiths shepherding their charges forward, until the robots themselves gave voice, war-casters blaring across every part of the audible range, overwhelming completely the prayers of their masters. The ground throbbed with infrasound as much as with their ground-shaking stride. It was enough to tremble the soul. If Q-Lint were ever to experience a lapse in faith in the most sacred God of Machines, one look at those dread units tramping forward would surely cure it.

The robots picked up speed. A wave of warcode went before them, scrambling alien systems. The dumb automata of the necrons responded sluggishly. Gauss lightning crashed into the kastelans' blessed repulsor grid. It flared, sparking gridded lines that absorbed much of the fire, and hurled some of it back into the ranks of the foe. How glorious to see the abominations of the necrons atomantically stripped to sparking carcasses by their own weaponry!

The robots stretched out their fists. Phosphor bullets screamed, plunging into metal bodies with hard noises, lighting up the innards of the enemy with their harsh light. When the kastelans reached close range, they unleashed long tongues of white-hot flame from their incendine combustors. Not simple promethium, but cocktails of hyper-flammable liquids, chemical laced, and triply blessed by the enginseers. They burned far hotter than simple fire, and against it even necron necrodermis was a poor defence.

The fight was not entirely one-sided. One of the great robots fell, riddled through with blackened holes and sparking green. A second locked, limbs paralysed, and crashed down with a sonorous clang.

No matter. They would be retrieved. They would be refurbished.

The robots came into melee distance.

The charge of the Legio Cybernetica was a glorious sight. More than twenty sacred machines, each with its own storied history, slammed into the hordes of the abominations.

Kastelan power fists swung, crumpling necrons and blasting their limbs from their bodies in coruscating displays of disruption lightning, sending broken bodies flying tens of feet backwards into the soulless horde. As they swung their huge hands, the robots continued to fire, riddling the necron phalanxes. A spear of red plunged deep into the tide of age-dulled metal.

It was a glorious moment. Matters took a turn for the worse from then on.

An excited data-squawk from Sigma-9 interrupted Q-Lint's enjoyment of the battle.

'Exalted one!' Sigma-9 said. 'Something approaches. A grade-fourteen interstitial intrusion from the ninth substrate.' Sigma-9 tapped spidery metal fingers on the active glassite screen of the omnispex.

'Excellent. It appears that we have flushed them out of their oubliettes. The final phase begins. Prepare for victory.'

Some three hundred yards in front of the Adeptus Mechanicus lines, green ball lightning rolled into view. It pulsed violently, tendrils of energy striking down to lick along the desert floor. The sight pleased Q-Lint: it was a sign that the enemy were struggling to break the normal dimensional limitations, and that meant his frame stabilisers were working.

Crackling, throbbing, painfully green, the phenomenon stabilised just long enough to allow a sole scarab-drone to manifest. The drone floated forward five feet above the ground, totally silently, coasting between warring soldiers from both sides.

Weapons levelled at the scarab, ready to blast it into its blasphemous components.

Sigma-9 consulted his displays. 'It is unarmed, exalted one,' he relayed.

'Then hold your fire,' said Q-Lint. 'Let us see what it wants.'

'I am receiving a request for data exchange,' said Rovol.

'It wishes to parley?'

'It would appear so, archmagos,' said Sigma-9.

'Then we shall communicate.'

'Perhaps we should destroy it, lest it pollute our informational space with its lying code streams,' said Rovol.

'The Omnissiah will maintain purity of our noospheric network. Let us hear these xenos beg for mercy before we destroy them,' Q-Lint said avidly.

The machine stopped in front of the abeyant. Q-Lint regarded it with appalled fascination. Ordinarily, he was only this close to functional necron devices when he was destroying them. Now he could observe it clearly, he thought uneasily how similar it was to the holy servo-skulls of the Cult.

The thing tilted up, and its single green eye shone with dancing sparks. The sparks became a line, which projected a kind of ribbon beam, which became a tri-d rendering of a necron; one of their higher forms, projected at

what Q-Lint took to be life-size, being a little taller than a tech-thrall. Not terribly imposing. Its immobile skull-face was framed by a large, crown-like headdress, and a long cloak of metal scales hung from its shoulders. Arrogantly, it appeared unarmed. The quality of projection was utterly lifelike, far better than Imperial hololiths. For a moment, Q-Lint thought the lord had manifested before him, until his short-range augurs returned nothing but the signs of air and light.

The necron spoke. The slot of its metal mouth did not move. None of its features could. Its words were incomprehensible alien gibberish.

Archmagos Dominus Q-Lint SpaForrix3 looked down from his abeyant at the translexer.

'What is it saying, Rovol? What are its terms of surrender?'

'Archmagos, with all due respect, your understanding is compromised. It must be the burden of conducting so many artful thought-streams at once,' Rovol said grovellingly.

'Which means?'

Rovol dropped his gaze. 'They wish us to surrender, and depart.'

'Ridiculous,' Q-Lint said. He turned to the hololith. 'What do you want? We're winning,' he said, using the slow and imprecise vocalisations of Terran High Gothic. 'You cannot expect us to surrender.'

The necron grew in size. It looked a little more imposing. Q-Lint stopped himself from emitting a blurt of alarm.

'Let me put this in your barbarous tongue,' the abomination said, daring to pollute the sacred Lingua Technis of Mars with its voice. *'I am Phaeron Zhulkan, courtier to the king of kings. You trespass on my property, Terran. Depart now, or be destroyed.'*

Q-Lint laughed. 'We are destroying you!'

'Are you? Very well,' said the necron. *'I shall take that as rejection of my offer. I had thought you might serve me. But I am not displeased. Destruction will be more of an entertainment.'* The projection shut off. The scarab executed a perfect one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turn, and floated away.

'Was that it?' Q-Lint said.

'An invitation to surrender. Most unusual,' Rovol mused. 'Most unusual indeed.'

'There is still no sign of higher necron forms,' said Sigma-9.

‘What was that, then? A data-ghost?’ Q-Lint said.

‘A bluff. A semi-adaptable simulacrum. Necrons are not in the habit of offering terms. They wish to force our withdrawal. It is a sign of desperation, archmagos.’

Q-Lint nodded. That seemed appropriate. ‘Not a bluff, an affront,’ he said. He raised his secondary weapon arm like a scorpion’s tail over his head and shot the scarab down with a phased plasma stream.

Perhaps the scarab’s destruction acted as a signal, or the necron lord had a taste for the dramatic, but at the precise moment the scarab’s burning shell bounced off the stony ground, the sky opened, and Q-Lint saw his doom approaching.

A black shadow blotted out the sun. The ground shook with a passing gravity wave, sending combatants on both sides sprawling.

‘Archmagos! There are higher forms approaching.’

‘That is readily apparent,’ said Q-Lint, as the sun was swallowed whole.

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Chapter Four

GRAVITY WAVE

PYLON SHIP

A DARING EXIT

The *Purity of Steel* was moving out of orbit when the gravity wave hit and overwhelmed the ship's grav-plating. Sensors embedded in Camalin Hiax's thorax informed of the flux moments before the ship upended and he found himself skidding across the hangar, his four metal claws drawing sparks from the floor. The pitch steepened. His colleagues slid past him, Chul-phi completely out of control, Osel-den scrabbling at the metal. Just as the ship seemed about to heel over, the firing of attitude thrusters trembled the deck, arresting its roll. Hiax came to a slewing halt by the far wall. The lander hung heavily above him, held in place only by the clamps locked around its landing claws. A second or two earlier, and they would not have been engaged.

<Protistos-Navtis, report,> he canted to the command deck. He was the mind of the ship when in transit, bonded to it as commander and component. When he was out of communion with the *Purity of Steel*'s machine spirit, one of his servants captained, which functioned well under normal circumstances. At a time of crisis like this, not being in control made him feel spectacularly impotent.

<Major vessel inbound, six thousand miles, twenty-three degrees ecliptic ascending. Adjusting grav-plating.>

Bass humming throbbed through the hangar. His sense of gravity switched round. The floor became down again. Hiax cantered from the hangar towards the cradle room. He needed full communion with the vessel through the manifold.

<Translation from the empyrean?> he asked. He half hoped for reinforcements, but in these benighted times it could just as easily be Heretic Astartes or xenos raiders.

<Negative. Non-empyrical phasing technology. A necron fleet has arrived in-system.>

<Send me readings.>

Data flooded his sensorium. This was bad, this was very bad indeed.

<Begin immediate acceleration,> he commanded. <Set course for the nearest gravipause. Begin plotting evacuation course.>

<The archmagos dominus' orders are that all ships are to engage in low-orbital bombardment of necron positions,> the Protistos-Navtis responded.

<The archmagos dominus will soon be dead. I am making my way to the cradle room. Be ready to relinquish command.>

<We can make it to the Mandeville point, holy one. It would be safer,> Osel-den interjected. He was running to keep up with Hiax. A hopeless task, since Hiax's motive carriage allowed him to run at speed.

'We cannot,' Hiax said aloud at him. 'We will be hunted down and destroyed long before we reach the system's edge. Swift escape into the warp is our only chance. The necrons will not follow there.'

The *Purity of Steel*'s main drive activated. They felt the push of it deep in their bones. Hiax fought against the acceleration like a man wading through an ocean tide.

He outpaced Osel-den and reached the cradle room first. The small door hissed open in anticipation. Already, the room's manipulators were moving. He ran into their embrace. They grabbed at his waist, automated power drivers slotting neatly into cavities and twisting, drawing out the bolts deep inside, others removing the electrical connections that bound his torso to his carriage. His four legs sank into themselves, and deactivated. The arms were lifting his upper body up and towards the cradle when Osel-den

arrived, mouth agape in an expression Hiax found so annoyingly vapid he slammed the door in his face.

He was left alone in a room lit by red emergency lumens. Still the *Purity of Steel*'s acceleration pushed on his body. There were no impacts. They were not under direct attack yet. None of the ship's sensors showed signs of pursuit. With luck, they might slip away unseen. The *Purity of Steel* was small, space was large, and not even the necrons' augury technology was omniscient.

He urged the machines to greater speed. Within five seconds his upper body was seated in the cradle. His twitching metal spine clicked into the union socket. He did not wait for the secondary connections to engage before he threw his mind into the ship's manifold.

The technology was the same as that which allowed princeps to bond with their Titans, or knights to pilot their steeds; a union that bridged the divide between man and machine. For him, the gap was not so big. Many of his thoughts came now from auxiliary cogitator units. Only his very core remained organic, the brain locked away in his armoured cranium.

Machine sensation flooded him. The thousand thousand systems of his ship cried out for his attention. Though he was attuned to such things, it was still something of a shock to move so suddenly from one world to another. A valuable moment was needed to centre himself, to filter the essential from the unimportant. Dimly, he was aware of the secondary connections slotting home, and the cradle restraints steadying his body, then his sense of the physical dropped away entirely. Noospheric awareness rushed through him. His mind merged with the ship's. Systems thrummed with machine-born emotion. The *Purity of Steel* had taken a fright. He calmed its spirit, looked out through its eyes.

Over the nameless world, FD-10's fleet was engaged in full combat with an immense voidship. It was a double pyramid that made a diamond shape as big as a battle station, a deep groove burning with lights around the middle where the two pyramid bases joined. Green lights shone from its surface. Windows or power nodes, Hiax could not be sure. Attack craft were speeding out from massive hangars like swarms of insects. There were lesser warships in attendance, crescent-fronted, pyramidal superstructures on their backs. They seemed unnecessary. As he watched, huge beams of braided green energy erupted from three corners of the diamond ship's

central canyon. Hiax tasted the power unleashed through the ship's auguries. It was phenomenal, akin to the complete energy output of a forge-fane. The beams swept down onto FD-10's explorator vessel. Void shields blazed with purple fires, were rapidly overwhelmed, and died in a flicker of corposant. The beams cut into the ship, chopping it neatly into fragments, and snapped off.

Where FD-10's command craft had been, a cloud of wreckage spread.

The rest of the small Mechanicus fleet split, its five ships fleeing in every direction. They fired their energy weapons as they fled. These were potent by Imperial reckoning, and they carved ragged wounds into the surface of the double-pyramid ship. Yellow fires roiled over impact sites. Green lights blazed from within where the hull was opened, but the necron ship was so vast it absorbed the punishment. The smaller Mechanicus vessels were beneath its notice and it ignored them, sending flights of fighters in pursuit instead. The vessel itself came to a hovering stop over the world.

The *Purity of Steel* was as yet unnoticed. This luck would not hold. Hiax needed a way out before they too were spotted and attacked. The nearest true gravipause, a calm spot between celestial bodies where the actions of their mass attraction cancelled each other out, was one hundred million miles away.

There had to be another way.

He took control of the main augur array, and shut down all active scans. Signal pulses would only reveal them, and he did not need an active send and return to find what he was looking for.

The moon. It was large, close. There would be a gravipause there. It was only half a million miles out from its parent, and much smaller than the world. The gravipause would be close in to its surface. Translating into the warp near to any sort of large mass object was almost always fatal. The currents of gravity bent the warp along with the materium, but the two did not match up. Gravitic shear could tear the ship in half.

It was their only choice.

Hiax executed a course change, bypassing completely his small command crew. The ship's directional engines let out long, hard gasps of plasma. The change put stress on the vessel, and the *Purity of Steel* groaned with iron pain.

Osel-den's binharic intruded into the noosphere. <What are you doing, Camalin?> he said. Even in the mathematical world of the machine spirits, his panic was obvious. <You can't mean to translate close by the moon! The ship will be ripped to pieces! We're all going to die!> Fear made him forget his sycophancy.

The *Purity of Steel*'s spirit heard this.

<Cease input immediately!> Hiax responded. <You are panicking the ship. The lunar gravipause is the sole chance we have of escape. We will soon be noticed, and we will be chased down.> As if to underline his point, one of the other Mechanicus vessels vanished in a ball of expanding gas, its reactor blown. He switched his mode of address to inform the crew, broadcasting by vox and data across the ship. <Attention, faithful of the all-powerful Machine God. We are to attempt empyrical translation at the mid-lunar gravipause. The gravipause is unstable, close to a large mass body, and small. Exiting the materium will require exact calculations. I do not undertake this course of action lightly, yet it is our only chance of escape. Navigator Visscher, begin preparations. Enginarium, start the warp engine.>

He ceased his message. Osel-den was still hanging around on the periphery of his consciousness. Hiax shut him out of the ship noosphere. He needed to concentrate.

The *Purity of Steel* was moving fast now, and still accelerating. The pocked face of the sorrowful moon was racing towards them, a crescent of it locked in deep shadow, the sunward side a powdery white. Should the ship have continued to accelerate, then it would have reached half the speed of light within a week. Its engines were powerful, but they were not powerful enough to outrun the necrons. The ship's senses prickled as a powerful augury pulse washed over it, returned at increasingly shorter intervals, and locked on.

They were found.

<Camalin!> Osel-den broke his way into Hiax's reverie. <Pursuit!>

<Keep out of the deep noosphere, sub-magos!> Nevertheless, Hiax switched his attention rearward. Several squadrons of necron fighters were breaking off their chase of the last two Mechanicus vessels. They moved with incredible agility. Their technology neutralised inertia and possibly their mass – nobody in the Adeptus Mechanicus had formulated a satisfactory hypothesis that Hiax knew of – enabling them to perform

manoeuvres that would destroy an Imperial vessel. Their pilots were inorganic, needing no air, food, or water. They were immune to gravitic stress, tireless, and fearless.

The ships sped after the *Purity of Steel*.

<Contact in five minutes, thirty-two seconds,> Osel-den announced, ignoring Hiax's order to remove himself.

This was going to be close.

The gravipause was ahead. In Hiax's graviton visual overlay, it appeared as a calm spot in a whirlpool generated by the conflicting pull of the moon and its world. It shifted about, small vortices breaking off from its edges and spinning away to nothing. The ship was a thread, the gravipause the eye of a needle.

Hiax pulsed commands to the ship, causing tiny course corrections. Each microburst of propellant was calculated to the last cubic micron of gas.

A tense three minutes passed.

A larger spill of gravity rolled off the gravipause, and the spot shifted a few hundred yards. Hiax corrected course again.

A green flash blinked in the void ahead of him. Behind, the Doom Scythes were catching up, near enough to fire their death rays. Void shield sparkle shimmered over his rearward views as one of the weapons connected.

He returned his attention forward. The gravipause was ahead. He dared not return fire on the necron fighter craft for fear the smallest photon push would cause him to miss.

'Warp ingress calculations are complete, my lord tech-priest.' Cloina Visscher was a lugubrious woman, a heavily mutated scion of her house whose form strained at the definition of acceptable. She was only ever happy in the warp. *'I stand ready for your command.'*

Hiax pulsed a brief affirmative. He didn't have time to talk.

Another ray hit the rear of the void envelope. The energy input was significant, almost sufficient to overwhelm the first of the barriers. He transferred the greater part of his attention rearward to gauge their pursuit, and was arrested by what he saw behind them.

The giant necron vessel was calving off huge fragments of itself, each of which rotated and descended towards the world below with a stately finality.

He activated vid-capts and doubled up the augury log recording frequency.

Just in time, he looked forward again. They were on the gravipause.

<Activate warp engines on my command!> he canted.

The void shields burned with cold purple fire. A necron Doom Scythe flickered past, travelling at speeds no human vessel could match. The gravipause continued its slow eddy. Energy beams slashed into the back of the *Purity of Steel*. The first void shield burst in a shower of exotic particles. The necrons were close, in tight interdiction pattern, firing all together. The second shield was under intolerable stress.

<Now!> Hiax commanded, with every fragment of his soul.

The Geller field activated. The void shields collapsed. For a moment, the stinging bite of alien energy cannon hitting the ship's armour nipped at him, sending phantom pains shooting up his spine. Space flexed. A second vortex overlaid the unsteady gravipause, this one visible in the normal visual range. The moon was huge behind it. If they missed, they would be torn apart and their wreckage scattered across the satellite.

The universe began to part. Hiax wrenched his awareness out of the ship's noosphere as the warp rift gaped, narrowly avoiding his own, premature damnation from staring through the gates of hell.

He blinked in the red lumen light of the cradle room.

The shudder of translation passed over the ship. He felt the queasy roil in his soul as they passed into the warp.

'Translation complete,' Navigator Visscher said. '*What is our destination?'*

Hiax thought on what he had seen. He replayed the vid-capt in his mind. The ship was the biggest necron vessel he knew of. Surely, those were pylons it was laying? They looked like pylons.

'We were wondering how they were spreading the nexus, perhaps this is one way,' he said to himself.

Someone needed to know about this. Someone with influence. Hiax's own lowly status as a penitent meant he would not likely be listened to without higher endorsement – at least, not quickly enough – and everyone else who might have witnessed the ship was dead. What he had seen here was important. He needed someone who could act, who was not enmeshed in the hierarchy of the Cult, or else was high up enough it they could get him to someone with influence who would listen to him. He still had friends. He

needed someone who was very highly placed, and in exactly the right position…

‘What is the last known location of the Ryzan Sixth Macroclade?’ he asked the Navigator.

‘Anduman,’ Visscher responded. *‘They are attached to Fleet Primus, Battle Group Rhosus. As of six months ago, Terran reckoning. They may have moved on.’*

That didn’t matter. It was a place to start.

‘Take me there.’

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Chapter Five

THE POWER OF THE MACHINE

ZHULKAN

A QUEST IS DONE

Q-Lint had lost. The necron ship blotted out the sun. As it descended it filled the sky, until the heavens served only to frame it with a thin, yellow line, accentuating its immensity.

The noosphere flooded with alien denial broadcasts. Flights of attack craft raced down from the gargantuan ship. Q-Lint dispassionately examined the vessel. It was so big it should have inflicted a continuous level of seismic disturbance on the world, but after the first upset of its arrival, nothing happened. Not a tremor. It was almost as if it were not there, in mass terms, although it most certainly was. He could see that by the flare of exploding plasma reactors as FD-10's fleet was blown out of the void.

He canted to his troops that they should assume a defensive pattern. The necron garrison was reduced to handfuls of warriors, but these were now operating with a focused intelligence, retreating from the Adeptus Mechanicus lines into new, more effective formations. At the same time, pulses of energy radiated from on high, resurrecting the shattered warriors from death.

Building-sized monoliths floated down from the sky, silent as death. Q-Lint had everything he could target them. They arrived barely scratched, and came to a stop a few feet over the battlefield. Solid columns of energy stabbed down from the ship, smashing apart the last of his Onagers. The doors of the monoliths opened. Glaring green light flooded the plain, and pristine necrons marched out by the hundred.

Teleport energy crackled at the centre of the enemy formation. This time, the necron lord put in a personal appearance. It looked about itself, as if inspecting a place it knew well but had not visited for some time. Then it looked directly at Q-Lint, its eyes ablaze with a malign intelligence that was repeated in the ten thousand stares of the necrons surrounding the human position.

It raised a hand theatrically. Q-Lint had some experience with the higher necron forms. The lower types were almost as limited as servitors. The higher ones were arrogant, vain and pompous. They were also linked at a fundamental level to their servants. There was no need for gestures in order to command them.

The necrons raised their weapons.

‘Fire!’ Q-Lint screamed, with every form of communication available to him. The Adeptus Mechanicus let fly with all the weapons they had left.

Phaeron Zhulkan dropped his hand. The result was devastating.

The entirety of Q-Lint’s command was ripped apart. Gauss beams stripped them away, layer by layer, deconstructing them so utterly there was nothing left but screams on the wind. Gauss lightning slammed into his abeyant, dissolving it at the atomic level. It tipped forward, and he fell from it to the ground. His cranial links were yanked painfully from the upgrades arrayed around his carriage, and he sprawled amid the crawling after-lightning of the discharge.

He held up his hand. It attracted a cold nimbus of foxfire. That was it. Remarkable, really, Q-Lint thought. Where did all that energy go? The temperature around him had not changed by as much as a tenth of a degree.

He was alone, his army reduced to scrap and gory fragments.

The necron lord Zhulkan raised his hand again, and closed it. His legion put up their weapons, and stood to a ghoulish mockery of attention. Scythe-shaped attack craft came to a hovering stop in the sky. Having demonstrated his mastery over his servants, Zhulkan marched forward from his line, his

long cloak of metal scales moving by itself. Even as he walked, scarabs were descending behind him, gathering up what was left of both sides, converting metal, flesh, plastek, glassite and all into pure energy.

Archmagos Q-Lint dragged himself from the advancing abomination. The after-effects of the gauss strike fizzled in his nervous system, making it hard for him to control his limbs.

Zhulkan stopped at Q-Lint's feet and looked down upon him. The necron was very much larger than he had appeared in the projection. His animus was a complex layering of energy fields. Light shone through his hollow ribcage. A strange scent followed him – hot metal, mainly, and ionised air, but something else too, something truly alien. Q-Lint realised with halting horror that he would never know what exactly that smell was. His quest for knowledge was over.

Once more, Zhulkan surveyed the world. He had around him an air of weariness, like a man who was coming to terms with the scale of the task ahead of him. When he spoke a moment later, his voice was very deep, but the Gothic he employed had a neutral accent, such as might be used by a highborn of any one of ten thousand worlds.

'You should have taken my offer,' Zhulkan said.

He bent forward, and with one terrifyingly strong hand picked up the tech-priest by his robes, and hoisted him, augmetics and all, into the air. The effort he employed seemed minimal.

'We ruled this galaxy once. Now the Great Sleep is over, we shall again. When we have purged it of the corruption you have encouraged to take root here, and order is restored to the Infinite Empire, then perhaps we shall allow your species to persist for a while. You are of some minor interest, I admit.'

From the sky came a series of hollow booms. The giant ship seemed to split, shedding great black splinters that came drifting down through the sky, slow as seed pods.

Zhulkan turned Q-Lint from side to side, inspecting him, before letting out an almost organic sound of disappointment. The machine dropped the machine priest. Q-Lint's heavily augmented skull thumped onto the ground.

'You are inferior. You shall not be among the specimens preserved.'

The necron once more lifted his hand, palm up this time. A flicker of green lightning danced around his fingers, and a long-hafted weapon built itself

from nothing. Q-Lint's implants recorded this impure feat of dimensional engineering diligently, though they would never exload the information, slowing nearly instant materialisation to a speed that could be observed, and appreciated – and it should be appreciated, for this was a technology of the highest kind.

At the end of the shaft a broad spearhead came into being, phantasmal energies cohering into cubes of hyperalloys that snapped together, crafting a blade whose edge was sharp enough to part the stuff of creation itself. A green crystal grew within a cavity at its centre, igniting with a soft, alluring light.

'You are impressed? So you should be,' said the necron. He lifted the spear and drove it down hard, severing the spine of Q-Lint, whose last sight was that of Zhulkan leaning on the haft of his glaive, and peering down at him curiously. 'What is it your sub-sect says, "There is no strength in flesh, only weakness"? How right you are.'

Q-Lint's perception shrank to a line as his implants failed one by one, then a dot, then that winked out, and he was no more.

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Chapter Six

THE IMPERIAL REGENT

AN UNWISE IDEA

CONFESSIONAL

‘For the Imperium, for the Emperor!’ Roboute Guilliman, last loyal son of the Emperor of Mankind, held aloft the sword of his father in signal to his army.

‘Throne aid us, he’s going to do it. He’s actually going to do it. Watch him,’ Stratarchis Tribune Maldovar Colquan voxed his command squad. He was a hard man and had a voice to match, solid and unforgiving as a slab of granite. Custodians Taquis and Lagus, Andos and Bellian readied themselves to protect the hope of mankind from his own folly.

The primarch broke into a run through the forest of monumental stone columns. The Custodians chased him. Three hundred Space Marines in myriad liveries came behind.

The question of why Guilliman had to lead his troops into battle vexed Colquan greatly as he ran at the primarch’s heels. They approached the highway through one of the last sections of the cave yet to be mined. Dense formations of stalactites and stalagmites provided cover all the way down to the road’s edge. They were cutting it fine, Colquan thought. The ground was already rumbling violently. Off to his right, a fissure gaped suddenly,

exhaling the mephitic breath of the underworld in hissing torrents. From close by came the crash of stone on stone as a stalactite plunged from the ceiling.

There were thermal springs in abundance on that side of the cavern, hot waters that ran from circular pools deposited by the issue of the rock. Delicate frills directed the water from pool to pool, and they spread in fractal complexities most of the way to the road. Colquan ran through the water, shattered formations underfoot. The water splashed high and dried quickly on his golden armour in the stifling heat, leaving ringed rimes of salt.

Eriun was a world rich in rare minerals. Veins of palladium, iridium, gold and ruthenium glittered in the rocks, overlaying each other so thickly that whole sections of the cave wall appeared to be made of metal. The planet was tied indirectly to the forge world of Metalica, and there had been a garrison of skitarii there. It had been inadequate to stop the Word Bearers. Broken cybernetic components were scattered in the pools. The biological parts had boiled away. Bleached bones lay beneath the water, already halfway to joining the rock.

The Space Marines neared the road. Installations appeared in the gaps between stalagmites, in ones and twos at first, then in large numbers, sucking at the world's churning heart to power Eriun's industries.

The thick forest stopped suddenly, sheared clean by the giant excavators employed by the mining operation. The road was perfectly flat. A wide, dusty space some hundred yards across reached from the forest columns to the geoplaned cave wall on the far side. A perfectly formed tunnel stretched off to vanishing point in both directions. Two miles away to the right, distant sunlight shone through a square cut into Eriun's skin, lighting up broken loading machines that had once taken ores to the surface. To the left was cavern nine, sector two, mined out and lifeless.

Guilliman slowed. His men followed suit. Colquan and his warriors remained behind him. Space Marine officers watched the primarch with the avidity of hawks, and the entire line halted as one in the shadows of the rocks and the machines. They were hidden, mineral deposits rendering augur and auspex useless.

Few but Colquan would have seen it, but Guilliman was tense. The reconquest was taking too long. Each minute wasted on a world was a

chance lost to aid another planet. Every second saw ten thousand Imperial citizens dead somewhere else.

Is that why he insists on taking these ridiculous risks? Colquan thought. *Or is it simply because the primarchs were flawed, one and all?*

The enemy occupied the far side of the road. A gate inset a few yards into a tunnel led into the complex majoris. Firing slits had been seared through the rock by melta cutters on either side of it for dozens of yards. Charging that was suicide.

They waited.

A soft chime was all the warning given that the strike was incoming, then a low but insistent hum before a dozen heavy Land Speeders blazed out of the transit tunnel into the cavern, then off the road into the cover of the stone forest. They moved so fast they were darting flashes of colour in the narrow spaces between the blunt teeth of the world. The enemy hadn't seen Guilliman's infantry, but they certainly saw the flight. Missiles screamed out. The forest flickered with the flames of a thousand explosions. The bunker slits on the far side of the road flashed with boltgun fire. The Land Speeders were meant to take out the worst of the heavy weapons before the infantry attacked. That was the plan.

Also reckless, thought Colquan.

The speeders banked round to approach the enemy positions head-on, tricky given the road's width, trickier still with the enemy firing. One was caught, turning into a flaming meteor that exploded against the rock. Another aborted its attack run, too harried to release its payload. The rest opened fire the split second before they reached the wall. Dozens of missiles flashed from their mounts and streaked unerringly home, slamming into the bunkers. The Land Speeders peeled off at insane angles in every direction, some running perpendicular along the wall, and were away.

Dust rolled out. Stone clattered on stone. Guns flashed in the sudden, choking murk.

'Now,' commanded Guilliman.

The Space Marines erupted in a long, multicoloured line from the stone forest, right into a rush of enemy fire.

'Onward, onward in the name of the Emperor!' Guilliman shouted. The Emperor's Sword burst into dazzling flame.

From the bunkers heavy bolters started up. Those of Guilliman's men who carried heavier weapons stopped, braced themselves, and returned fire. Bolts, beams and missiles streaked back and forth in pyrotechnic exchange. The rate of fire was intense. Guilliman's force charged into it, their armour absorbing a tremendous amount of punishment, though not all. Ceramite broke apart under multiple impacts, leaving shattered war plate and dead men lying all across the road.

'I'm going now, tribune,' said Guilliman. 'You may follow me if you wish.'

The primarch broke cover.

'Watch him!' Colquan snarled into his closed squad vox. The Custodians raced after.

When the primarch emerged from the forest of stone and let his augur baffles drop, his men enjoyed a respite.

Resplendent in the gold and blue of the Armour of Fate, twice the bulk of his warriors and surrounded by the gleaming gold of Colquan's guardian squad, Guilliman was an obvious target. Gunfire intensified, all directed at him.

That was the enemy's first mistake.

The energy shields built into the Armour of Fate turned aside the worst of the fire. Arcane machinery groaned with the effort of keeping him safe. What little got through pattered off the thick plating. Colquan's squad put themselves between the firestorm and the primarch, and though they were less fortunately armoured, their auramite turned many bolts aside. More and more weapons were trained on Guilliman. His men raced forward, exploiting the lapse in the enemy's attention. Fixed on the primarch and his Custodian guard, the enemy let the Space Marines get near.

That was their second mistake.

Ceramite clashed on stone as Space Marines threw themselves against the walls next to the firing slits.

Grenades lobbed through slits were not quite enough to slay the power-armoured traitors inside, but the explosions interrupted their fire and spoiled their aim, allowing more heavily armed Space Marines the opportunity to get close. Eradicators jammed the nozzles of melta and flame weapons into the slits and fired blind. Blasts of molten rock and explosive gas roared out. Desolation squads, now free to fire without being targeted themselves,

launched salvoes of superkrak missiles across the road, sophisticated targeting optics guiding the munitions right into the bunkers. More explosions followed. More enemy guns fell silent.

The enemy's fire died back. The power field flare around Guilliman dimmed. Colquan ordered his men to flank the last loyal son as he headed for the small fortress gate. The primarch did not move fast, but continued with his regular stride, the last of the gunfire flaring off his shield. He pulled back the Hand of Dominion and swung at the door, the disruption field sheathing the gauntlet set to full strength.

The door exploded inward. Guilliman followed his fist, his body bursting through the compromised metal. Foot-thick plasteel still live with crawling licks of lightning sprayed into the corridor, knocking down the Word Bearers stationed behind. Guilliman let fly with his underslung bolt weapon. A traitor went down, his chestplate shattered and chest reduced to red ruin. In Guilliman's other hand, the Sword of the Emperor flashed into flames and he went among the Traitor Space Marines with vengeance in his hearts. He was into the enemy before Colquan could move in front of him, striking and slaying with his father's blade.

Severed limbs and pieces of armour ablaze with uncanny fire bounced around the corridor. One of the enemy's heathen priests called upon his gods to aid him, but Guilliman was watched over by the Emperor Himself, and the arrows of magic the Dark Apostle cast the primarch's way fizzled to nothing. The priest died, his upper half obliterated by a strike from the Hand of Dominion.

'Get ahead of him!' Colquan commanded. 'For the love of Terra, get ahead of him!'

But Guilliman pushed the Custodians aside, and remained in front.

'First line breached, all units advance,' the primarch commanded, and went ahead, seemingly not caring if Colquan was with him or not. The desire to fight, to slay to forget, burned bright in him.

Gun turrets set in the corridor walls tracked and opened fire. Once more, Guilliman's energy field danced with sparks. Colquan directed the fire of his squad at the emplacements, blasting several apart. Guilliman still would not wait, and marched at them, smashing them as he passed. Behind him, Space Marines poured into the corridor, finishing off the traitors that still lived. There could be no mercy for their kind. Guilliman's men split and

took side routes from the main way in, but the primarch ignored these lesser ways. He wanted the main prize for himself, and his goal was ahead.

Colquan had his men follow.

The complex shook. The locus of the seismic activity was nearby. A tectonic rupturer, the tech-priests said, a mining tool overloaded and set to destroy. If they did not reach it soon, it would tear through the upper layers of the crust, into the planet's core, and wreak widespread destruction on Eriun. Colquan understood the urgency. But Guilliman should not have been there. He should not lead himself.

A door pierced a wall into the next mining gallery. It opened onto a large, fusion-cut platform overlooking another cavern that was bigger and deeper than the first, completely mined out, a huge cubical void, no lattices of minerals, no columns of rock. Only the low density of the surface stone in that part of the world, a sort of airy pumice, prevented the ceiling collapsing in on itself. In the pits below, the remnants of a polluted lake boiled as it rushed into fresh chasms in the floor. The glow of rising lava shone from beneath, turning the water into billows of scalding steam. Ruddy clouds gathered in the upper reaches of the cave. Guilliman headed for the brink of the platform. More tremors shook the underworld.

Colquan applied filters to his vision; even his superlative sight was unable to pierce the heat and fire and steam. He saw the target, a brightness in the middle of the cave.

'I have eyes on the primary target,' Guilliman voxed.

'My lord,' Colquan said. 'Stay back. You have done enough. We can deal with this more appropriately.'

The primarch turned to him quickly, an almost feral, animalistic movement. 'How? An orbital strike will collapse the cavern and bury the machine, effectively armouring the rupturer if it is not destroyed. We are closest. Other assets will not make it in time.'

'And I say you risk yourself unnecessarily for the sake of enjoying combat.'

'There are days when goals and desires align,' Guilliman retorted. 'It is both necessary and pleasing to do this by my own hand.' He looked over the edge. It was two hundred feet down, a straight drop.

'My lord! No–'

Guilliman jumped.

‘Stay here, hold this ground. Ensure no enemy follows,’ Colquan commanded his squad, and leapt after the primarch.

Infernally hot air rushed past him. He struck the ground hard, his armour protesting at this treatment with a chorus of alarms. His bones shook with the impact. He had damaged the left leg. The auramite was cracked, the fibre bundles registering intermittent power feeds. He must have interrupted not only the primary circuit, but the backups.

The pain vanished under the cooling relief of his pharmacopeia. He suspected he had minor bone damage, torn cartilage and muscles. It could have been worse.

Guilliman was racing ahead. Another earthquake rocked the cavern. Jets of steam roared up from the cracks, and the last of the lake was gone. Not far from his position, lava oozed up from below and began a tentative spread.

His left leg dragging, Colquan headed into the cave.

Colquan’s armour registered a great expenditure of power ahead. The floor shook. The cave was thick with superheated fog. Lava burst in short-lived founts from the ground. It banged heavily off his auramite. There were calls to his vox, seeking the primarch. His brothers’ signum codes flashed in his vision. He did not reply. What could he tell them, that the last great hope of mankind was risking himself again?

The tremors increased in ferocity and frequency, until they ran together, so that the ground shook more than it was still. There were great tearings and roarings from the stone beneath his feet. It was probable the auramite would not protect him from immersion in molten rock. He picked up the pace.

Under the grinding of tortured stone, a steady pulsing came. From ahead he caught the click and calls of eager machine spirits, blindly following a programmed course to their own destruction.

The rupturer emerged unexpectedly from white drifts of steam.

Guilliman was standing by it, dwarfed by its hundred-foot height, a bewildering tangle of shiny pipes that diverged from one another and rejoined so many times it was impossible to tell where they began, though their ending was clear. All ultimately plunged into the ground. Around its spread of tripedal stabilisers, the ground was fissuring a hundred times, narrow but deep cracks from which the fires of the mantle shone upwards.

Guilliman readied his weapons. Colquan expected some sort of monstrous guardian waiting to confront him. The Great Enemy applied the rules of legend to the real world almost slavishly. But there was nothing there, just utilitarian technology crudely repurposed. The Word Bearers had ravaged the Segmentum Solar, and been chased out. They had suffered for their plans. This revenge on a lowly mining world was petty, and free of traps or guile. It was a costly tantrum. They had lost many men for the sake of lashing out.

‘My lord! Wait!’ Colquan called, fearing a trap.

Guilliman either did not hear or chose not to hear. He walked to the central control node, drew back his arm, angled the tip of the Emperor’s Sword down, plunged it deep within the mechanism, twisted, and withdrew. Fire burned for a second inside. The mining device died undramatically.

Colquan froze for a fraction of a second. Nothing happened. The tremors subsided. There might be an eruption, he supposed, since the world’s geology had already been perturbed, but Eriun would live to serve the Imperium.

Contra-grav engines buzzed overhead. Land Speeders cut across the cavern in a search grid. The primarch watched them impassively, but did not signal the men looking for him. Was he thinking of slipping away, abandoning his responsibilities like Russ or the Khan? Colquan wondered. He almost wished he would.

‘We’re down here,’ Colquan voxed. ‘I have the primarch.’ Guilliman looked at him, his helm hiding whatever he was thinking, but he remained where he was. Colquan walked stiffly to his side. His golden armour ran with condensation. Guilliman’s power field glimmered in the thick air. Colquan looked up at this other son of the Emperor, and could barely hide his annoyance at what he saw.

‘That was extremely unwise,’ said Colquan.

‘I thought you wanted me dead,’ said Guilliman.

For a few seconds the two creations of the Emperor of Terra stared at each other. A tension in Colquan’s shoulders betrayed his wish to strike. He willed it away. The primarch waited, sword burning brightly still.

The moment passed. The primarch deactivated the Sword of the Emperor. The fire guttered out.

‘I believe you call me no more than a living weapon. It is normal that weapons wish to be used, or else what is the point of them?’

Colquan stiffened. His armour purred softly. The long red tassel on his conical helmet swung, the threads of it stirring in the hot currents as if alive. ‘Valoris assigned me to protect you. You are the Imperial Regent. Imagine what would happen if you died.’

‘So you say, Maldovar,’ said Guilliman. ‘I do not understand why you keep up the pretence that that is your only mission. Your opposition to my rule is obvious, as were Valoris’ reasons for choosing you as my watcher. By now you should have seen I am in no danger of following Horus’ path.’ The ground gave out one last tremulous heave, and the shaking ceased entirely. The heat remained.

‘Time will tell,’ said the Custodian. His helm display flashed. A priority missive from the flagship. He read it quickly. ‘You should turn your vox back on, my lord. There is news. A delegation from Mars has arrived, an emissary from the Fabricator General. They come in force, and are currently with the main body of the fleet. They petition for immediate audience, as is their right as representatives of a High Lord of the Adeptus Terra.’

Guilliman nodded. The brief respite of combat was over.

‘War is eternal,’ he said drily. ‘Politics more so.’

Archmagos-Emmisarius Leeta Unter Sobel-Phi cowered under the glare of Roboute Guilliman. Her paired servo-skulls, hovering nervously nearby, kept their ocular sensors pointing down, their machine spirits unable to look the primarch in the face.

Guilliman sat in a high throne of white marble upon a dais reached by three steps. A harsh pool of light shone around him. All else was black. The polished stone of the audience chamber was dark as the void beyond the light, and the walls were lost to the gloom. As soon as she had seen this place, she’d recognised it as a room for fury.

‘This is ill-favoured news,’ Roboute Guilliman said. He spoke calmly, but he was angry. ‘You should have informed me years ago.’

‘Forgive us, my lord. What I have described to you was the will of Oud Oudia Raskian. He is dead. The succession crisis is over. The new Fabricator General believes a clean data-slate must be presented to your

Imperial majesty. You are the son of the Omnissiah, the flesh and blood of the Machine God. You deserve to know. Please, accept our humblest apologies.'

'Ever has the greed of Mars been a blot on your souls,' said Guilliman. 'You come to me with this not in the spirit of honesty, but because you are losing a war you have started.'

'I must protest, most holy lord. We did not start it. We were greedy, rapacious even, but the awakening of the necrons only began at pace with the opening of the Rift.'

Guilliman leaned back in his throne. The Armour of Fate's power pack grated upon the back rest. His seat had to be large because he could not remove the armour. Comfort was an ease denied to him.

'If I were to take a less charitable view, I would say you come to me now not out of contrition, but because you have no choice. The balance of power between Terra and Mars is fragile. I could easily say that your people have sought advantage for yourselves by mining this blackstone and exploiting the xenotech of the necrons. Mars was never comfortable under the yoke of the Imperium.'

'My lord, please. Ten thousand years have passed since the days of the Mechanicum. You yourself strengthened the bonds between our worlds, and brought the people of Mars and her fiefdoms fully under the benevolent protection of the Imperium.' She looked up at him pleadingly. Her eyes were false, dark glass, their tubular plasteel mounts protruding unpleasantly. Metal anchors sunk deep into the bone of her cheeks and forehead held them in place. Her lower face was covered by a jutting metal mandible. The little skin between the eyes and mouth was sallow, dry-looking, bunched up around her augmetics. Electoos glowed on her bald scalp in the shadows of her hood. Her robes were deep red, the holy colour of Mars, mother of all forge worlds, and suzerain of the dominions of the Adeptus Mechanicus.

'Ten thousand years where you have been trying to reassert your independence, as I understand it,' said Guilliman.

'That is not true, my lord, Terra and Mars together *is* the Imperium of Man. Two heads of the aquila, under the rule of the Omnissiah, who is the representative of the Machine God clothed in flesh.'

'I see,' said Guilliman, and his voice was cold. 'If that really is so, why was this information kept from me?'

‘I cannot say, my lord,’ Sobel-Phi said. ‘There have been great changes on Mars since the disappearance of Oud Oudia Raskian. The previous Fabricator General was in office for centuries.’

‘So you blame your master’s predecessor for this disaster.’

‘With all respect, my lord, what else should I do? It is the truth. We have come to you directly.’

‘You waited years,’ he repeated, and leaned forward. ‘Years.’

‘Years of research, of collation, of cross-checking. Trillions of data points from our acquisitorus conclaves, explorators and technoarchaeologists consolidated and interpreted by the finest data-predators in the Imperium. Only when we understood what we faced could we give you correct data. It is irrefutable. The necrons are awakening everywhere.’

Guilliman stared down at her, eyes hard. ‘Let me frame this picture my way,’ he said. ‘Mars has deliberately downplayed a major threat to the Imperium, thinking to seize the sciences of the necron foe for their own benefit. In doing so, you have undoubtedly sped their awakening, whether or not you are ultimately responsible for it. Your forces are outmatched. Your domains are under threat. Only now, at the eleventh hour, do you reveal the magnitude of what the Imperium faces because of your actions.’

‘The situation is complicated, lord.’

‘It seems simple enough to me.’ Guilliman looked aside for a moment, his expression angry, yet thoughtful. ‘I thank you for your news,’ he said. ‘I will consider it and formulate a course of action in due course.’

Sobel-Phi lifted her head. ‘What might I tell my masters?’

‘That we have spoken, and that I am displeased. Go from my presence.’

‘I shall return to Mars.’

‘You shall not. You shall stay here for the time being.’

‘I am expected back.’

‘I am the Imperial Regent of the Imperium of Man. The Adeptus Mechanicus is an adeptus of the Imperium and therefore beholden to my command, and I command you to stay. I will give you my judgement soon. In the meantime, transfer all data you possess on the necrons to my staff.’

‘It shall be done, my lord.’

‘Do it immediately,’ he said. ‘Now go.’

Sobel-Phi got up off her knees and bowed low. Her servo-skulls floated down, dipped their own salute, and turned to follow their mistress.

She reached the end of the hall. The doors opened. Guilliman caught a glimpse of his Victrix Guard and the Custodians standing sentry in the corridor outside. The doors shut, leaving him alone again.

‘Lumens,’ he commanded.

The hard light around him blinked out. Softer lights hidden in ornately carved sconces lit the walls, revealing friezes carved in the black marble around the room. He closed his eyes, pinched the bridge of his nose with his armoured fingers, and remained thus in thought for some minutes.

‘Vox,’ he said softly.

The machine spirits heard. A bronze head detached from a mount in the ceiling, and descended to hover at his side.

‘Lieutenant Tanus,’ he said.

‘My lord?’ His equerry’s voice issued from the grille set over the head’s mouth.

‘Summon the Lady Blaaz. I have need of her finest astropaths. Get me scribes, transliterators and oracles. I have many messages to send.’

‘Is there a new emergency, my lord?’

‘When is there not?’ said the last loyal primarch. ‘Fleet Primus must gather. See to it now.’

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Chapter Seven

THE RELIEF OF OIL

THE BURNING SKEIN

ANNIHILATION

Illiyanne Natasé's Dire Avenger guard opened the chamber for him. One inside, one outside, at all times. Four of them on permanent rotation. They were far from well-travelled halls. The *Dawn of Fire* was always busy, but there were quiet spaces. It was in such a corner of his palace that Guilliman kept the farseer, away from those who might do him harm. Given the humans' xenophobia, that was practically everyone.

Once inside his quarters, Illiyanne Natasé removed his helm and wrinkled his nose. The smell was the worst. That meaty stink the humans had, even when they were clean, which they so rarely were. Humans offended his nostrils. He would complain about it, if there were anyone to listen. His escort returned to his silent vigil. Dire Avengers made perfect bodyguards, but poor conversationalists. The Path of the Warrior did not encourage gossip.

Natasé put his helm down on a table, ignoring its stand in his haste to find some release from the smell. The air was filtered, perfumed; it didn't matter. The smell of them was so cloying, it got everywhere, stuck to everything. He thought that if he ever returned to his home, he would never

be rid of their stench. He imagined the shame of it, and a grey glumness fell over his mood that he knew would take hours to shift.

He went into the main chamber, straight to a table covered in exquisite glass bottles. He immediately reached for a small vessel of chirilis oil, removed the stopper, tipped it delicately so two drops of oil ran onto two of his slender fingertips, dabbed them under his nostrils, one drop for each, then inhaled. He sighed. The relief from the smell of the humans and their machines was immediate, replaced by the complex scents of forests. He could still smell, that was the benefit of the oil: it blunted unpleasant odours and made them bearable without compromising his senses. It was supposed to be a temporary freedom, but he had come to rely on it, and he used it often, though that was inadvisable, for it reddened the skin and could cause permanent damage. But the fragrance was the only thing that cut through the scent of the humans. He believed, with the sour completeness only the depressed can manage, that disfiguration and a little pain were a price worth paying.

The headache he perpetually carried with him lightened. It would not go away. There was never that much relief.

He excused himself this indulgence as necessary. He needed to concentrate for the ritual. It was a convenient lie. He would have used the oil even if he had not needed to read the future. His exile with the mon-keigh had him crawling out of his skin.

Natasé spread out a black cloth stitched with runes and elaborate borders of threads of precious metals. He spent some time arranging it properly, losing himself in the task, the wraithbone charms on his slender arms clicking with their sad music. When he was as satisfied as he could be, he sat cross-legged at the centre of the cloth, and unhitched the large pouch he carried forever at his waist, also black and of smooth velvet. He untied the top, then upended it almost carelessly. Aeldari moved with purpose and grace. This carelessness was intentional. A little chaos was needed when reading the future.

The runes fell in a sorry tangle. He blamed his location more than himself for their disorder. The *Dawn of Fire* pressed in on him savagely, its belligerent purpose, its cargoes of misery, its dull human minds, and their stink… The *stink*.

Human machines were ugly, heavy things, made of brute metals and bound together by pain. He missed wraithbone halls, he missed the peaceful minds that moved through hidden capillaries, the secret lights that shone inside, the gentle tides of the times before ebbing around him. He had connections here, of course, and that was the problem. His mind sensed the lives lost to make the unlovely *Dawn of Fire*, the many thousands of humans living in squalor required to keep it running. No matter how comfortable he made his chambers, and there were definite limits to that, he felt as if he were dwelling in a pavilion erected upon a platform, and though the pavilion was very fine, beneath the platform squirmed piles of vermin feeding desperately upon each other in the dark.

'Focus,' he whispered, and realised he was using the human's uncouth tongue. He spoke it more than his own. He shook his head, angry with himself, and repeated the word in the Ulthwéan dialect of Asuryani. He began to hum, making his fingers dance in time to the tune as he plucked up the runes and rearranged them before himself. Wraithbone sculptures on plinths around the room responded to his music, and began to sing. The music calmed him.

'Focus,' he said. 'By the dead gods, and the living, bring me clear sight.'

Many Asuryani loathed humans. Humans stole from all branches of the diminished aeldari race, exterminated them without question, destroyed the good and pure in their blind need to take. That they were barbarians was undeniable, but he thought them a necessary evil. Humanity had once been mighty; their first realm among the stars had been almost as great as the old aeldari empire, and could be so again. His people looked down on them, but he doubted his own kind had ever possessed humanity's infuriating tenacity, or their vibrancy, or shared their drive to live. There was a broad, bitter strip of cynicism in the aeldari soul. When young, Natasé had noted this. Anguished, he had sought out his elders' counsel, and they nodded sage heads, and said this came about a short time before the Fall, that it had caused the Fall, and that once the aeldari had been a pure and noble people who looked upon creation with wonder, but he wondered if his gods and ancestors were the paragons the legends insisted.

He wondered too if the aeldari, old and bitter in their fading days, had not looked upon the vitality of men and been consumed by envy.

Mankind had fallen from its heights, and languished five thousand years in the pits of savagery, while the aeldari sat secure in their own superiority, composing melancholy verses about the transience of power, only to fall themselves.

The aeldari fall had been swift and absolute. Mankind's fall was not yet complete. Both were part of the same cycle, the same war. The galaxy was in the final act of a performance begun millions of years before. All depended on what was to come. He had his part to play in that.

'For that, I must endure their stink,' he upbraided himself. He set the final rune in place. They were now in a fan before him, each piece of fine wraithbone situated carefully on the cloth. He closed his eyes.

Natasé had always been fascinated by humanity. His enthusiasm for the youthful race was why he had been chosen by Ulthran to come to Guilliman and advise him. He only regretted it some of the time.

'Focus,' he said. 'Focus.' He chanted the songs of the ancient days under his breath, forcing himself to concentrate. The music of the sculptures buttressed his voice with their orchestra. He teetered on the brink of disassociation from the grubby metal world he'd been imprisoned in for several long years.

He could not attain it. The noise of human technology was unbearable. It intruded on his meditation, interrupted his attempts to grasp the path. Once heard, the rumble of the ship could not be ignored, and made everything loud and obnoxious.

He opened one eye, then the other. They were black as pitch, and darker than sorrow itself.

'Reniel,' he shouted testily into the outer chamber. 'Take yourself outside. Your breathing is so loud I cannot hear myself think.'

The Dire Avenger obeyed wordlessly. Natasé waited for the door to grind shut, then he resettled his posture and closed his eyes again.

Once more, he chanted. Once more, the sculptures sang.

'Focus,' he whispered, in between phrases of the ancient song. 'Focus,' he said, using it as a marker, a counterpoint to the melody and the murmurings of his heart. 'Focus.'

Finally, he felt his mind shift. Moving his soul out of his body was never so difficult as it was now.

The first of his runes gave out a clear, pure note as it rose into the air. Then another, and another, their sweet resonance complicating his song further.

He looked through the ship and its stench of human sweat and oil and filth, out into the stars, then past them also, through the veil that shifted inconstantly between the world of life and the othersea, that ocean of tainted souls.

He would not go in it. He could not go into it. Just looking at it was dangerous for the likes of him. But the warp had its allure, and he could not resist a peek. Even then he did not see it as it truly was – to do so was an invitation to damnation – but he experienced it at several removes, as one might hear a distant sea, smell the minerals, and note a change to the light without ever setting eyes upon the water.

The touch of humanity was on the warp, as it was on the materium. Men were everywhere. They infested everything. Only the orks were more numerous. Man's pollution tainted the warp. Natasé recalled the legends of the times before the War in Heaven, when the warp was pristine, and benevolent. It was not humanity's fault that it had become what it had become. The beings that had moulded his forefathers and the necrontyr bore responsibility for that, but humanity had agitated it, made it worse – far, far worse. Of all the many races that had risen and fallen in the long spans of the aeons, humanity held the key to the end, or a new beginning. They were the fulcrum upon which the fate of the universe balanced. Tip them one way, and all would fall; tip them another, and his people, all people, might be saved. This was the role of the farseer, to look ahead, to change things that were yet to be before they flashed through the now to become things that were, and therefore immutable. To pick the best path through the braided possibilities of the future. The tenuous, thread-thin path to survival.

His apprehension of the warp faded. He was in control.

The skein unrolled before him, a fast-branching, organic web of possibility. All aeldari psykers saw it differently. For him, it appeared not as a tree, or web, but as the spreading, tubular branches of a vast circulatory system that crossed and recrossed itself. The envisioned pathways surged with lights of a nigh-unbearable brilliance. In the radiance were points brighter than others, the great souls. Guilliman should have been one of those, only…

The skein could not contain the primarch. Or perhaps it would be better to say that the skein could not contain his father. The Anathema blazed at the end of every road that Guilliman's path took, and every path that led towards the column of searing pain that was the Emperor of Mankind shrivelled to ash, hiding His intentions from all but the greatest seers. Eldrad Ulthran could read the future around Him, sometimes. Natasé did not know of any other farseer that reliably could.

He saw battle with the soulless ones, legions of the metal-skinned false bodies the necrontyr had damned themselves to at the beginning, and so set in process the slow-motion catastrophe that was still consuming reality. He saw monuments of blackstone. He saw Guilliman. He saw war. That was nothing remarkable; there was always war. This battle was bigger than most: human vessels, thousands of them, fighting in the void, millions of human soldiers battling unliving armies of a size not seen since great saurians walked upon Terra and the aeldari were yet young.

Guilliman, primarch, exemplification of humanity's flaws and blessings, a ship ablaze, a…

He focused, the skein rippled. Paths diverged, diverged, then plunged together. Guilliman fighting, Guilliman…

A sensation of soulless dread fell on Natasé with sudden awfulness. He saw a giant in silver; there were others with him, there were…

He let out a grunt as the skein burned away. From far away he heard the soft, velvet thump of a rune falling from its station and hitting the cloth his body, somewhere, sat upon. The link between primarch and Emperor was so strong, so wild, no vision could contain it. The future evaporated in front of him. Did that mean that path was invalid, and would not come to pass? He could not say.

He doubled back, his spirit swooping over the possibilities of time like a raptor. Backwards, the path was certain, the few branchings always resolving themselves back into the whole, largely and blessedly inert. He turned again, and the skein unfolded again, its maddening spread racing into futures that, while yet undefinable, he attempted to define.

'Guilliman is distracted from his war against Chaos,' he said aloud. 'A new threat, to the south, far from the old aeldari core worlds. Old foes awakening. Old foes by the million, the billion, the trillion.' Visions of the

galaxy swept through his head. Stars and worlds and possibilities were a dizzying whirl. ‘Necrontyr. The old foe, necrontyr.’

Again that face, old and implacable, unreadable, soulless and unyielding metal. What was it? He did not know. Again he followed the skein, again he saw the legions of men and machines go into battle, the humans’ debased technology set against the unparalleled might of the ancients. Again, the skein began to burn as the future swung around, to track inexorably to Terra, and even in that private place constructed in his own mind, the great and terrible regard of the Emperor of Humanity shone through the tissues of reality to sear his soul.

He saw Guilliman in battle. He saw… He saw…

The skein curled and blackened. He felt pain, real pain, as he tried to hold it in his mind’s eye. He saw Guilliman fighting again. He saw Guilliman…

Falling.

The skein curled back all around him, burning his soul. Before it did, he saw that nearly all roads led to this eventuality. Beyond it there were hints of collapse, of reality forced to the extremes of Chaos on one hand, the extremes of the material on the other, imploding. Endless Chaos or lifeless eternity.

There was nothing beyond but a few thin threads. Threads of hope. Past the dark, there were hints of the skein growing fat again, but only if those few, rare opportunities were taken. Otherwise…

‘Annihilation,’ whispered Natasé. His eyes flew open. The runes fell from the air. He panted. His body stung with phantom pains.

‘Annihilation,’ he repeated.

He had to warn the primarch.

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Chapter Eight

LORDS AND LADIES

THE SKEIN DENIED

CONTINGENCY

Being kept away behind a screen did not suit Natasé. It was an insult that he, who had come to help these terrible primitives, should be shut away from their sight. He watched through fretted wood while servants came and went from the audience chamber vestibule, all of them inflated by their sense of self-importance. They arrived flourishing papers, whispering knowingly to one another and exchanging glances laden with meaning before taking their places on the long benches that ran down either side of the hall. They were of high rank. They were made to wait nonetheless.

Natasé was always safely hidden from view. His presence in the fleet was not exactly unknown, but the humans did not like to advertise it. There were parties in their empire who were suspicious of Guilliman. Trafficking with aliens did not help the primarch's cause, so the farseer was treated as if he were something to be ashamed of rather than as a respected ally.

Many times the aeldari had stood shoulder to shoulder with humanity, and this was how the mon-keigh showed their gratitude. Natasé attempted to remain phlegmatic. He was superior to men, and therefore must forgive them their inferior ways. Nevertheless, he felt snubbed, and that made him

angry, and to give in to emotion was more than a sin for an Asuryani; it was dangerous.

The people came and went, their boots squeaking on the polished floor. Some cast glances at the screen. Some of them might have known that he was there. Time did not mean the same to an aeldari as it did to a man – it was quicker, less demanding – yet still time dragged for Natasé in that box. He had a headache. The stink. The light, which was simultaneously inadequate and too bright, a yellowish pulsing that made the stone carvings decorating the hall seem even more grotesque than they were.

The brass doors into the chamber swung open soundlessly. The gene-constructs who guarded the Avenging Son were briefly visible in their vulgar armour, and the doors shut.

Natasé waited for another supplicant to be called. They were impassive. Showing impatience was a sign of weakness, and nobody at the top of a hierarchy wanted to be seen as weak. Some could not help themselves. They had been waiting a very long time. All of them, surreptitiously or otherwise, kept their eyes on the entrance.

There was a soft knock at Natasé's door. A human with a deferential manner and a stiff uniform opened it, and bowed.

'My lord farseer, the primarch will see you now.'

'Good,' he said. He took up his helm; it was too tall to wear in that confined space, and he was exposed fully to the dreadful reek of humanity. 'Lead the way.'

The man took Natasé into the audience chamber by a back way to keep his offensive presence hidden. A door was opened, he was ushered in, emerging through a hinged panel of a painted frieze. The room was dark, and could be rendered almost completely black, he had realised long ago, but the lumens revealed the art that had gone into the room. It was almost noteworthy, in a crude sort of way.

'Farseer,' Guilliman said. 'I apologise for your wait. I prioritised your audience, if that in any way excuses the delay.'

Natasé smiled tightly. It felt insincere, even to him. 'I understand. Your responsibilities are many.'

'They are endless. I am glad to see you, but must be quick. Speak.'

'I have travelled the skein,' the aeldari said. 'I have seen disaster ahead. You must not commit yourself to this attack on the necrons.'

Guilliman leaned forward a little. ‘That plan is not common knowledge.’

‘I have seen it, on the skein,’ Natasé said. ‘If you proceed, it will lead eventually to disaster.’ He paused. ‘Their ruler has returned. They are organising.’

Guilliman nodded, as if this made perfect sense to him. ‘They act with too much coordination to be ungoverned by a central authority. You may well have just revealed him to me.’

‘You should not rush to confront him. If you face him, you will almost certainly fall. If you fall, the old war will be over, and the universe will be torn asunder.’

‘I see,’ said Guilliman. He glanced down at his hand. It tightened on the stone arm of his throne. ‘Will this come to pass soon, or does this action lead to later disaster?’

‘The latter, my lord primarch.’

‘Tell me – you were bound by your master, Eldrad Ulthran, to advise me well, so tell me – is that disaster a certainty?’

‘Very few things are ever certain, my lord.’

‘Is it certain?’

‘No. There are a few paths that will avoid disaster. Very few.’

‘Then I am afraid you must help me find them, because I cannot turn aside from this threat. It must be confronted now.’

‘Must you confront it yourself?’

‘You aeldari are very keen that I survive,’ said Guilliman.

‘For now,’ said Natasé.

Guilliman laughed briefly. ‘And did you explore what would happen should I not go? I suppose that the result will be the same, in the long run.’

Natasé bowed his head. ‘It is hard to see. Anything involving my lord leads to his father, and the Emperor obscures all paths on the skein. I would advise you that there are more paths to victory if you do not go.’

‘Victory against who, when, and for whom?’ Guilliman said. ‘Forgive me, Farseer Natasé. I ask that you try to see this from my point of view. The skein, as I understand it, is a projection of your species’ minds, a way of seeing what may happen, and what may be prevented. It is used by your species’ seers, for your species’ benefit. Is this not true?’

‘It is so,’ agreed the farseer.

‘So, it could be that these few paths, which as you say exist, will lead to victory for both our people. It could be that if I take the other route, I may live a while, and mankind survive, only to fall at another time. But let us say for the sake of argument that in this alternative future, your people survive. So, if I listen to you, I may be trading the possibility of victory for humanity, and perhaps for you, for the certainty of victory for your people and the downfall of my own.’

‘That is not the case. It is not why I am here,’ said Natasé.

‘This time. Can you in all honesty tell me that will not come to pass?’ said Guilliman. ‘Even if it is your personal, honourable intention not to mislead me, because of the very nature of your abilities, and your role in your society, you might well do so.’

‘I cannot avow this,’ said Natasé.

Guilliman’s manner became warmer again. ‘I have had a lifetime of prophecies and seers. They are often so certain, and are often wrong. Frequently, their fears bring about that which they fear. I know full well that the sole purpose of your caste is to ensure the survival of the Asuryani aeldari. I would that they did survive, for you are a noble people, and if we were to have the time and space without these endless wars, I am sure some accord could be met between our species.’

‘That has not been our experience these last millennia.’

‘I said under ideal circumstances. This era is far from ideal. Now, under the pressures of the end, I must go where my will takes me.’

‘You question my purpose, so I shall do the same in return.’ Natasé looked up. ‘Can you be sure your will is your own?’

Guilliman’s brow furrowed. He was quiet a while. ‘I cannot. But I can say that if it is the will of the Emperor that guides me, then at least it is a will that serves mankind. For all the wise counsel you have provided me, you do not serve mankind. That is the crux of our debate here, I think.’

‘Then you will not be dissuaded from this campaign?’

‘I will not. The attack goes ahead.’ Guilliman looked at his hand, then lifted it up to stare at his palm. ‘There are people who say your kind have too much influence on me. This armour, for example, it would not have been made without your help.’

‘That is true,’ said Natasé. ‘But our desire is to see you victorious, lord regent. If our people do not stand together, time will come to an end. Chaos

will devour eternity.’

‘So we stand together,’ said Guilliman. ‘You must understand that I am not your puppet.’ He closed his fist. ‘I have my own will.’

‘If you will not heed me, then at least listen. Do not underestimate the necrons. They were our foes in ages past. They came close to total victory. Only when they realised they could not prevail over my ancestors did they disappear.’

‘Is this fact?’ asked Guilliman.

Natasé shrugged. ‘It is legend. This occurred more than sixty million of your Terran cycles ago. Who can say? But aeldari legends have roots of truth. The necrons are stirring. Do not underestimate them. They killed the Old Ones, who ruled this reality for time immemorial and shaped this galaxy to their model. Then they killed their own gods. They endured the great plagues that came after the war. They have slept so long. They have endured. If they are awakening, if the Silent King has returned…’

‘If,’ said Guilliman. ‘I shall give you another if. If I avoid this being now, if he exists, then what does your skein say? Will I prevail over him in the future? Or do we retreat and face him again only to be presented with unavoidable defeat at some further date? I say again, this is the correct course of action. You say there is a way through. However small it is, I shall find it, I swear to you.’

‘Then I fear you are doomed.’ It was clear to Natasé by then that Guilliman could not be swayed. ‘By your leave, I shall seek counsel with my master, if he can be contacted.’

‘Do so, Illiyanne Natasé, and know there is no rancour between us.’ He paused then, thinking on something that Natasé guessed he had long deliberated. ‘I am to institute a council of psykers to aid me. These are wars of gods we face. I need guidance. Your people and their skein, in fact, have inspired me.’

‘You wish me to help you establish this council?’

‘I want you to sit upon it,’ Guilliman said.

‘Then I shall,’ said Natasé. ‘If what I have told you does not come to pass, and by some miracle of the dead gods you survive.’

‘There are other ways of influencing the future, farseer. If this being exists, and he presents himself, then maybe we shall slay him, as I have slain so many other self-proclaimed masters of the galaxy.’

‘You have experience in xenocide, it is true,’ said Natasé. Guilliman’s manner worried him. He was too confident. ‘I warn you again, this foe is beyond you.’

‘It shall fall.’

‘If I were you, my lord primarch, I should pray to your god that you are right.’ He bowed, and donned his helm. ‘I shall not take any more of your time.’

When he left, he shrugged aside the primarch’s stewards, and went out of the front door.

He returned to his chambers in despair. An aeldari experienced emotion like no human could, and in the pits of anxiety then, Natasé envied them their limited minds. The path an aeldari followed helped them overcome the worst of it, but it was not a cure.

Natasé meditated for hours, casting his mind far into the othersea in search of Eldrad Ulthran. He could sense nothing. They were too close to the necrons’ realm, where the warp had become a dead space, devoid of all thought and feeling. It was like shouting into a tomb. He gave up on contacting the chief farseer directly, but instead sent forth a message for aid to whichever of his people might hear him.

It was his last chance. He would be unable to access the othersea at all once they drew nearer to the Nephilim Anomaly.

The aeldari had access to more realms than the realm of dust and the realm of spirits. In the interstice of the two realms, the great legacy of the Old Ones spread through time and space. The webway was his people’s domain. There was something else he could do. He got up, hunted around his room, chose one of his prized singing sculptures. It would serve as a seed. He went into his bedchamber, the room farthest from the door and most private. He ripped back one of the hangings he had placed over the dead metal walls, staggered with the effort of it, nearly tripped, his alien grace disturbed by his fear. He gathered himself, steadied his breathing, then drew back his arm holding the sculpture, and hurled it with all his might at the wall.

Metal could not shatter wraithbone, but as it contacted the wall, Natasé drew upon his powers, though it pained his heart to destroy so fine a piece. The sculpture exploded into a thousand pieces that he caught with a flash of telekinesis, directed, and pressed them up against the wall.

An aeldari changed their path with every season of their life. He was a bonesinger no more, but innate to all aeldari was the power to mould wraithbone, and he had spent human lifetimes cultivating the art.

He sang to the psychoplastic. It softened, and spread, melding with the plasteel of his chamber wall. Once it had rooted itself, he released his telekinetic hold. He continued to sing the branches into shape. They spread, and joined. The growth was slow. The bone was old, and their prior form long held, but all things could find new purpose, given enough coaxing.

He stepped back. He ceased singing now the pattern had taken. The wraithbone continued to grow of its own accord. He examined the arch in the wall a moment, watched the tendrils of changing wraithbone weaving a door into the webway, then rehung the tapestry.

Fate demanded a contingency. He had provided one.

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Chapter Nine

THE PRICE OF FREEDOM

JEALOUS GOD

MESSINIUS DELIVERS JUDGEMENT

‘Kneel.’

Amplified by his helm emitters, Vitrian Messinius’ words roared before him as he strode down the steps towards the round speaker’s rostrum at the centre of the circular Hall of Assembly, where the last dozen Presidial Guard of Antopie ringed Prime Elder Kinshell. The guards’ rifles angled uncertainly at the floor, as if the men holding them might decide surrender was not their best choice after all, and open fire. Their options were limited. The calculation was betrayed by tics and trembling lips on every one of their faces. Messinius knew this look. The look of impending death. There could be no victory for their short-lived democracy. The Imperial gauntlet had closed tight upon Antopie and would drag it back into the fold. They should have foreseen that, Messinius thought. They looked almost surprised when they should have known. The Emperor was a jealous god. He did not give up His territories simply because men demanded it be so.

Askani Rangers crouched in the curving benches stepping up the hall around the platform, a score of lasrifles pointed inward. The doomed men of Antopie might take a few of the Askani with them. That was the best they

could hope for – that, and a quick death. A further input in the calculation of mortality: the manner of death. Pain, or a swift end? The Askani regiment had lost a number of men taking the Assembly Hall, and they were in no mood for clemency. The potential for a messy end to this tedious, messy campaign loomed large.

Kinshell's men did not kneel. They would not drop their guns.

'I said, kneel,' Messinius repeated. His armour smashed upended benches, crushed broken glass to powder. He was an angel of the Emperor, an avatar of the Imperium's undeniable right to rule all the galaxy. The men on the rostrum moved uncertainly. One carefully laid down his autogun, hands slowly reaching up, palms forward, and began to lower himself to the floor. Kinshell grabbed a fistful of uniform in his hand, and shook his head. He was determined that he and his men would show no fear, though he was terrified. The soldier stopped, looking between his master and the approaching Space Marine, and froze, knees half bent.

Small fires crackled in the debating chamber. The benches smouldered, burned through with las-holes. Wood splintered by bolt-round impact made fine kindling. In half an hour the place would be an inferno. Smoke blued the upper reaches already, shrouding the balconies.

'You try my patience for the last time, Lord Kinshell,' said Messinius. He raised a hand, beckoned, and the cordon of Askani Rangers tightened the noose, advancing guns up. Bayonets glinted wickedly in the daylight let in by smashed glassaic windows. The rangers barely made a noise as they came down the stairs, dividing the hall into quadrants. It was a fine scene, Messinius thought, the sunbeams slanting through the smoke, the red of fire, the blue gleam of the blades. Kinshell's soldiers instinctively drew in, boots scuffing through debris, their weapons clacking off one another. They had nowhere to go. A couple of them half raised their guns again. One took aim. The cracks and flashes of three lasrifles felled him. No more firepower than needed to neutralise him. The Askani were disciplined.

Massive walls muted the gunfire rattling in the streets. They could not keep out the howl of Imperial void fighters gridding the city in search of the last pockets of resistance. Every screaming pass left behind a silence fragile as ancient glass that lasted seconds before being shattered by more gunfire. The reports of bolt rifles and lasguns were dwindling. The silences lasting longer. An end was at hand. The soldiers on the rostrum seemed to accept it,

and their weapon muzzles drooped. Their rebellion was over, and they were grim with the foreknowledge of their deaths.

‘Drop your guns, all of you,’ commanded their officer. He was a grizzled man, skin rough from years on campaign. He still wore Imperial medals of commendation. Galius, Messinius recalled. Not a native, still a traitor.

Autoguns dropped. The Askani Rangers moved swiftly in.

‘Make them kneel,’ Messinius commanded the Askani. ‘All of them. Kinshell most of all. Kneel. Now!’

A rifle butt driven into the back of a knee sent one man down. The other soldiers followed, casting their weapons away. Not Kinshell. An Askanian tried to force him, but the rogue commander pushed away the hands pressing on his shoulders, and stood tall. Always with these men, it was a coin toss between defiance and whimpering for mercy.

Messinius came to a halt next to the rostrum. He was much taller than the mortal men, so his eyes were level with Kinshell’s.

‘Your rebellion is over. Submit to the will of the Emperor once more. Show contrition, and perhaps He will admit you into His light.’

Kinshell was pale with fear. He licked dry lips and attempted to seem brave, digging about inside himself for the last shreds of courage. He had read, no doubt, of heroic words in the face of death. They were harder to come by than was commonly assumed. Messinius had seen many men die. Few did so with any wit.

‘You will show me no mercy,’ said Kinshell. ‘You will kill me.’

‘You are a traitor to the Imperium of Mankind, death is the rightful consequence of your actions.’

Kinshell lifted his chin. ‘I am no traitor. I serve mankind. I serve the people of this world with their permission.’

‘They too shall be punished,’ said Messinius. ‘You have done a great deal of damage. You cannot survive without the Imperium. You put other worlds near this system at risk. You knew this, and yet you acted anyway, seizing power for yourself.’

‘You would say that, you tyrants all do. I only wanted a better life for my people.’

‘You have brought them ruin instead.’

‘If I cannot expect mercy, you will get no satisfaction from me. You have come here to reassert tyranny. I will not cower.’

Messinius was in a poor humour to begin with. The reconquest had taken time and effort he could not afford. Thousands of men and women had died, valuable assets lost, the flagship of the battle group brought down by Antopie's orbital defences and Lord Commander Groupmaster Hest killed, all to bring to heel men who thought they knew better how to govern a world than the Emperor, putting themselves and countless others at risk of damnation in the process. Kinshell's last, petty, pointless defiance stirred him to an unusual anger.

'Then I shall make you kneel.'

Pushing the two Presidial Guard in front of the Lord of Antopie out of the way, Messinius broke Kinshell's femur with a sharp chop. Kinshell dropped to all fours with a half-strangled shriek, caught in his throat before it could shame him. He gripped the debris on the floor, his knuckles white with pain, then spoke through gritted teeth.

'If your fist represents the mercy of the Imperium. I want no part of it.'

'Silence,' said Messinius. He hated this kind of work, but if it made other Imperial governors think twice, then so be it. 'Your days of speaking are done.'

He beckoned behind him. A group of scribes came forward, bearing scrolls and ledgers. The surviving three provosts of Antopie's Adeptus Arbites precinct joined them; the rest of them were dead, slaughtered in the first nights of rebellion. A servo-skull swooped over Messinius and turned its vid-capt eye upon the group.

'Record collection is underway, my lord,' one of the scribes informed him quietly.

Messinius disengaged his helm seals with a thought. He reached up and lifted the helmet free, and cradled it beneath his arm.

Had he never trodden the path to the Emperor's service, Messinius would have been an imposing-looking man. With a face broadened and features thickened by the process of apotheosis, he was frightening. His black hair was left long on the top, shaved around the sides and back, though it had begun to grow out. The last of the fighting had been intense, no time for grooming. He had not removed his armour for a fortnight. He had reached that point of war where he couldn't tell where his body ended and the suit began.

‘I, Vitrian Messinius, Tenth Company captain, Adeptus Astartes Chapter the White Consuls of Sabatine, lord lieutenant of Indomitus Crusade Fleet Tertius, and acting commander of Battle Group Jovian, find you, Andraes Kinshell, guilty of rebellion against the Imperium of Man, of apostasy, and of false governance. Your experiment in democracy is over.’

Kinshell tilted his head back so he could look up at Messinius. ‘I never ceased to believe in Him as my god,’ he said. ‘I took issue only with His servants, and the interpretation of His will. I only sought to serve Him better.’

Messinius looked down at him from on high. ‘Most who wield power are not equipped to know His mind – what makes you believe you are any better suited than they?’

Kinshell lowered his head.

‘Magistrate, is the accusation just?’ Messinius asked one of the arbitrators.

‘All is done in accordance with the Lex Imperialis, my lord. We find him guilty. Due process is followed.’

‘Then the prisoner is yours for sentencing.’

‘As the senior Imperial representative, you have jurisdiction here. The sentence is yours to pass.’

‘Very well,’ said Messinius. ‘The sentence is death.’ He paused. This part was even more distasteful. ‘For him and his men.’

The long robotic fingers of Messinius’ power fist flexed, drawing Kinshell’s eyes to the horseman cast in auramite upon the back. His attention fixed on the agent of his destruction.

Kinshell sagged. ‘Get on with it.’

‘This?’ Messinius lifted his power fist. ‘This is not for the likes of you.’

‘My lord.’ Colonel Galius spoke up. He rose to his feet, slowly. Lasgun muzzles followed him. ‘Might I speak?’

Messinius inclined his head. The fire in the chamber was catching. The heat of it rose. Wood groaned. ‘I shall hear you. In honour of your past service.’

‘I do not deny that I am rightfully condemned. I broke my vows to serve an ideal. Foolishly, but I made my choice. These men did not. The men in the streets who you hunt now obeyed me. Let them live. Let them serve the Imperium in the penal legions.’

‘These men here, they had no opportunity to defy you? They had no opportunity to turn their guns upon you?’

Galius’ expression became grim.

‘At least give them a warrior’s death,’ said Galius. ‘Facing forward, into the guns, as they have the right.’

Messinius looked them over, these dusty, beaten men, their heads bowed towards him.

‘They have no right to anything. They gave that up when they turned their back on the Emperor,’ he said. ‘Provost, hang them all. Display their bodies where they will have the greatest effect upon the local populace.’

He left them upon the rostrum as the Askani moved in with ropes and fists at the ready.

‘I only wanted to save my people!’ Kinshell called after him.

Messinius ignored him.

An officer of the Askani approached him. ‘If we act now, we can save the building,’ he said, over shouts as the condemned men were manhandled, tossed to the ground, and their hands bound.

‘No,’ said Messinius. He put his helm back upon his head, covering his face with its brutal angles. ‘Let it burn.’

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Chapter Ten

A LESSON FOR QVO

CATCH-UP

A SUMMONS

Archmagos Dominus Belisarius Cawl, Prime Conduit of the Omnissiah, looked over the scroll projection before him, then pushed the tubes back together. They locked into place, and the floating screen went out.

‘Interesting news, my dear Qvo,’ he said.

Cawl’s friend Friedisch Adum Silip Qvo, or more accurately, the 87th iteration of Friedisch Adum Silip Qvo, made an interested face. Cawl saw immediately that Qvo was simply humouring him.

‘No, it really is interesting. It appears the representative of the Fabricator General of Mars has come to our lord with some unwelcome tidings.’

Couplings disconnected with a racket of differing noises. Gassy whooshes, mechanical clunks, electronic burbles. Cawl stretched out his ancient body, and the vast servo-carriage that made up his elongated lower portion slithered out of his rejuvenation station. He was mostly machine, but the parts that were still human were exceedingly old, and required regular care. Lights came on around the room. It was modestly sized compared to most of the vast chambers on the *Zar Quaesitor*, and crammed with peculiar machinery. Vats of fluid, grunting pumps, gene cataloguers, automated

repair stations and servo-skull roosts were but a few of the artefacts within. It looked like the plant room for a manufactorum that made obscure goods, or the hidden parts of a warp engine, or the experiment of a questionable magos. But it was none of those things. It was the closest thing Cawl had to a bedchamber.

‘Oh,’ said Qvo. His expression changed to one of sincere engagement. Qvo was even less human than Cawl. His face was the only organic part of him. ‘I suppose that is interesting. What does it concern?’

‘The necrons. Specifically, how much the Fabricator General of Mars has been concealing the extent of their awakening from the Adeptus Terra.’ Behind his scoop-shaped mandibular augmetic, Cawl pursed his lip thoughtfully. ‘Activities which exceed even my estimations.’

‘They do?’ Qvo was surprised. ‘Were you… mistaken?’

Cawl wasn’t going to admit he’d been wrong without at least token resistance. ‘Are you gloating?’

‘Me? No,’ said Qvo. ‘I am not human, and therefore incapable–’

‘Of human emotion, of which gloating is one. I must say, my dear Qvo, you do a remarkable emulation. But no, I would not say wrong, not as such.’

‘You say you are never wrong.’

‘I am Belisarius Cawl!’ said Cawl, throwing up a selection of limbs in vexation. ‘I’m never wrong.’

‘You are wrong sometimes. And you, a self-proclaimed expert on necrons.’

‘In this case I was misinformed,’ said Cawl testily. ‘Recode the genomes of twenty lines of Space Marines, Cawl. Unlock the workings of mysterious alien technology, Cawl. Close the Rift, Cawl. Predict an imminent catastrophe when it is being deliberately hidden from you, Cawl,’ he said. ‘I can’t do everything.’ He handed the electro-scroll to Qvo, who did not open it, but plugged it directly into his abdomen. ‘See for yourself.’

Lights flashed between Qvo’s thoracic plating. Data transferred directly to his half-flesh brain.

‘Most peculiar,’ he said. ‘But they sent a representative. Not the Fabricator General themself?’

‘So it seems. The Fabricator General is still quite new. They are busy. Either that, or they’re running scared from what the primarch might say. It’s

quite the thing to admit to the son of the Emperor that you've been engaged in a largely hidden war with an alien foe and that you're coming for help because you're losing.'

'There is a summons for us here, I see.'

'There is, and we must obey, though I must say I begin to chafe, Qvo. I wish to be off and about it. The primarch hasn't stated what he wants from me, but I expect he will be moving to this area here.'

Cawl pointed a mechadendrite forward. A miniature ribbon projector inside blinked on, and a small cartolith opened out.

'The Nephilim Anomaly,' said Qvo.

'The very same. Guilliman has had his eye on this for some time, ever since the peculiar business with the Ultima Threat Level missives on Terra.'

'What are those?' Qvo asked mildly. Sometimes, he seemed to possess all the wit and insight of the original Friedisch. Other times, he was mooncalf dim. Cawl had a few iterations to go before his friend was truly reborn.

'High-level pleas for help. Most of them get ignored. But there were hundreds of these, and they all arrived at once. Some saw it as a warning from the Machine God.' Cawl peered at the cartolith.

'Did you?'

'Absolutely I did,' said Cawl. 'It's about time something was done about this. The problem with the Nephilim Anomaly is twofold. Sub-problem the first, the anomaly is large and getting larger. In the last few months alone, the front line has advanced three light years in this area, engulfing many worlds, such as this one.' He pointed at a small dot, not knowing that this was the planet Camalin Hiax had recently fled. 'Sub-problem the second, there are many necrons inside the anomaly. Sub-problem the second, addendum one, emphasis – there are many, many necrons inside the anomaly, almost inconceivable numbers. There was a time when one could uncover and plunder a tomb world without so much as provoking a reaction from the maintenance constructs. Now, we have legions of abominable machines marching about and causing havoc, and it's getting worse. The Adeptus Mechanicus have been exploiting supposedly dead worlds while failing to detect that the necrons were there all along, sleeping soundly.'

'You didn't know they were there either,' said Qvo.

'Getting quite insistent about that, aren't you?' Cawl said irritably. 'Alright, I didn't know. But I suspected. It's been clear for some years that

the necrons themselves are not to be trifled with. More alert. More dangerous. More *numerous*. Even without this confession of our friends on Mars, the initial number of worlds they occupy had already been revised upwards, now it has trebled.'

'And still your own estimates seemed woefully inadequate,' said Qvo.

'Alright!' Cawl said. 'Please reduce your gloating response.'

'Think of me as the naysayer, in the court of a techno-king.'

'Don't make me deactivate you,' Cawl said. 'Come on. Let's go see our astropaths, and send a reply to the primarch.'

The vault door closing off the rejuvenatorium rumbled aside, opening onto a narrow corridor. They were deep in the warren of museums, archives, laboratories and libraria that constituted Cawl's private quarters. Up there in the ship, there were no other sentient beings. Everything mobile was a construct of some kind, born of the vat, of engineering, or of the operating table.

'I have heard it said that we are engaged in an arms race with these alien androids,' said Cawl. 'That, to me, does not ring true. Mankind's hubris is great, and we must act to counter it.'

'I am sure you are about to share your opinion with me,' said Qvo.

'I am! We are not in an arms race. We are playing a hopeless game of technological catch-up with a race whose knowledge is so far in advance of our own it cannot be comprehended. Well, except by me.'

'That is blasphemous. There is no technology superior to that of mankind.'

'That's all well and good as an article of faith, my dear Friedisch–'

'I'm not Friedisch.'

'–but it is not actually true. Human technology at its peak was a great and marvellous thing, but no amount of wishing and incense will make it more sophisticated than the technology the necrons employ. I have spent time with them, Qvo. They outmatch us in every conceivable way.'

'That is not going to be a popular opinion.'

'Unpopularity does not stop something being true.'

They reached a capsule lifter, and went inside. Grav-motors throbbed into life. Air hissed out of the tube. Cawl sent the machine spirit his desired destination, and the capsule accelerated down through the many decks of his ship.

‘It is time for the high and mighty to listen to the truth, or we’re finished,’ said Cawl, then he became thoughtful. ‘Although it will be very interesting for me to get large-scale data on the efficacy of the Primaris Space Marines in combat against this foe. Why, a full-scale, multi-system war will provide a bounty of information!’ He sounded quite happy about it.

The lifter took a sudden swerve to the horizontal and coasted to a halt. The doors opened.

‘That’s no reason to wish for war,’ said Qvo.

‘There will be war aplenty, come what may,’ said Cawl. ‘I am merely looking for a bright side.’

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Chapter Eleven

UNENDING TASKS

ARMOUR AND MEN

A RETURN TO THE FOLD

Messinius returned to the fortified Adeptus Administratum offices serving as his headquarters. Much of the city was on fire, but the fighting was finished. He strode by groups of kneeling prisoners blinking in the morning sun, hands on their heads. Units of Astra Militarum were strung out along all the major roads, overseeing lines of civilians leaving the city. Their footsteps filled the canyon streets with an unnerving shuffling. None of them spoke. A baby wailed somewhere, a strange sound in all that ashamed quiet, like the cry of the last bird in a dying forest.

Messinius would have to decide what to do with them. Depopulation of Antopie would be the standard response to planetwide insurrection, according to White Consuls protocol. Under the current circumstances, that was not an answer, though the gravity of their collective crime more than merited it. Repopulating the world would be nigh on impossible, given the lack of chartist vessels available. Furthermore, in these times of existential peril, every pair of human hands counted.

It was one problem of dozens. Messinius' duties were many; taking temporary command of the entire battle group multiplied them

considerably, preparations for the installation of a replacement government grew them further still. Half the battle group's chief strategic officers had been killed when the *Relentless* had been downed, and as a result command-and-control efficiency over the fleet was down by at least forty per cent, and that was his problem, nobody else's. After more than a decade of unrelenting war, Messinius suddenly found himself forced into a level of management he had last performed while as a proconsul back on Boros.

He made it back to the command centre in good time and was swiftly inundated by detail. He was closeted in chambers too small for his genhanced bulk for most of the day, deciding which of the local noble families to use to reconfigure the government, including the selection of a new governor, then he spent two hours receiving the surviving members of said families to offer them the benefit of his judgement. None of them were stupid enough to disagree with him, though none of them were happy with the terms offered. By the time that was done, and the Logisticarum and Administratum officials attached to the fleet had been set to work resupplying the battle group, others tasked with assessing Antopie for an immediate gathering of the exacta, which had gone uncollected for five years, and others yet assigned to work with the Black Ships following Battle Group Jovian to secure the psyker tithe, it was dark outside.

While all this was underway, Messinius had to simultaneously attend to a backlog of messages from the primary continent regarding the reassertion of military control. Following that, there were reports from the rest of the system, where various levels of resistance had been encountered. All told, the reconquest had taken three weeks. Not long, but it was an unnecessary diversion from the real business of the crusade, and generated a mountain of work. Interim plans created by various adepta needed approval and revision, requests for information from the Departmento Munitorum needed to be responded to and those from the Logos Historica Verita put off. Astropathic messages were sent by the dozen, informing the greater Fleet Tertius of their progress, while others went to the wider crusade. His own forces needed marshalling. Interplanetary patrols needed re-establishing, and the system's subdued armed forces purging, rearming, and put back onto a war footing, this time for the right side. There were still roving bands of Word Bearers plaguing the Segmentum Solar, and a weakened Antopie

would present a tempting target to any of them falling back from the segmentum core.

Naturally, Messinius had high-ranking members of all the major administrative adepta to call upon, as well as representatives of dozens of officio and departmenta. Many of these people were capable and not lacking initiative. All told, there were tens of thousands of officials to enact his orders, and there were millions of people beneath them to execute their commands, but responsibility had to stop somewhere, and it all stopped with him.

It was well into the early hours of the morning before the day's orders were formulated and dispatched. Cold draughts blew from outside. Messinius left the temporary strategium, and retired to chambers his servants had selected for him, but which he had not so far visited. He would be there only for a few days, he reflected, and that was for the best. He was forced to stoop under every door he encountered. His pauldrons scraped on the sides of all but the widest corridors.

On arrival, he found his servants had chosen the chambers well. They were in the records section, where high ceilings and wide ways offered him a respite from cramped, human dimensions. His helm displays directed him to a long hall lined with doors of age-dark bronze. One was open, spilling light into the dark corridor. Messinius went through into a tall, cylindrical room, open up the centre and lined with shelves containing thousands of neatly labelled scroll cases. It must have been one of hundreds of records rooms, given a system the size of Antopie. He began to calculate the number of records the system might generate in the space of an average year.

Stop it, he told himself. *This battle is over. Stop. Reflect. Recuperate. Begin again tomorrow.*

Not even a warrior of the Adeptus Astartes could go without rest.

Somehow, a large wooden tub had been installed in the middle of the room. It looked like a communal laundry tun. Perfumed steam curled over it. It made him realise how dirty he was. There was an armour stand off to one side of the room, and a trestle table neatly laid out with armourer's tools.

At the sound of his approach, a number of menials filed in. Their job was to fetch, cook, carry, and maintain, and yet they were honoured, for they

served an angel of the Emperor. They lined up in silence, bearing soap, towels, food and a massive jug of wine. Messinius' enhanced senses meant he could smell it, even with the lid closed. It was rich, dark, heavy with tannins. A Terran vine, certainly, but made unique to this world by time and distance from its origins.

His steward, Selwin, stepped forward and bowed shallowly.

'My lord, I have taken the liberty of drawing you a bath.'

'Rather bad for the documentation, all this steam, do you not think, Selwin?'

'This city is poorly furnished with chambers large enough to comfortably accommodate the Adeptus Astartes, my lord, and these at least have the benefit of being close to the forward strategium. Allow us to remove your armour.'

'Guilliman's codex recommends a warrior remain armoured while in an active warzone,' said Messinius. The labours of the day had left him in strange humour.

'Of course, my lord, although it is your decision if this warzone is active or not.'

Messinius answered by flipping up the cuff on his left gauntlet, disengaging the wrist seal attaching it to his bodyglove and pulling the gauntlet free. One of the menials hurried forward and took it from him.

'We are done fighting for now,' the captain said. He flexed his hand.

Messinius crossed the room where there were stands for his weapons. He sat his power fist in its cradle, reached round with his free hand and disengaged the power feed by twisting and pulling it out. A thought-pulse through the armour's supplementary nervous system had the arm cuff disengage, and he pulled out his hand. He wore the normal gauntlet, and with two quick movements he pulled that off too and handed it to the menials. Now both hands were bare. Their nakedness felt strange after so long. Sometimes, the ceramite battle plate felt like his real form, the flesh beneath a weak, inner organ best left unexposed.

Armoury servants approached him with tools, muttering benedictions to his armour's spirit as they removed it piece by piece. Smaller components they could lift themselves, though always working in pairs. The heavier elements Messinius dealt with himself: the breastplate, pauldrons and the like were too heavy for standard humans to manage easily. The power pack

was awkward even for him. He rested it on its stand before it was disengaged, then he turned around to seat it properly, his muscles bulging as he adjusted its position. In not so much time, he was left dressed only in his bodyglove, his neural interface sockets glinting in the holes cut into the fabric. This he peeled off with difficulty, being soaked thoroughly with sweat pungent and somewhat waxy compared to that of an unaltered human.

His skin quivered like that of a great beast. It was good to feel the cold on his skin. His armoury servants finished placing the last elements of his battle plate upon its stands, and withdrew. A few of the others remained to serve him food and wine. They did not speak to him. Messinius did not like to waste his breath on idle chatter, and those who served him knew his habits well enough.

The water was hot. Too hot for a mortal. It did not bother Messinius. Clean when he entered, after a few minutes the water had an oily sheen upon its surface. He ate a meal which, though large, was of simple, local fare. Like the wine, it was refreshingly uncomplicated in flavour. One of Hest's faults had been the fussiness of his table. Messinius had dined with the groupmaster often, as protocol required. He had not greatly enjoyed the experience. When the meal was done, he stood and his servants silently attended him, scraping his body with strigils, massaging him, taking biochemical readings to be submitted to the battle group's Apothecaries. Then he sat and they washed his hair. The bath took on a faint scent of smoke, burnt flesh and fyceline.

While they worked, Messinius brought the racing engine of his brain under control. He had no time for empty meditation, especially when there were problems to be solved, but there was a tension generated by constant, unrelenting decision-making he was glad to be rid of for a while. He looked forward to sleeping, not the half-sleep of the catalepsean node, but real slumber. A luxury for him. It had been days, but he did not complain, not to himself nor to any other. He bore his duty as the honour it was.

Half an hour after he had begun his bath and six minutes, thirty seconds after he had finished his repast, he received a request of audience from Captain Thothven, First Battalion, Second Company, First Brotherhood of the Unnumbered Sons of Guilliman attached to Fleet Tertius, Battle Group Jovian. The length of the title was a legacy of the beginning of the

Indomitus Crusade when the Unnumbered Sons numbered in their tens of thousands. Those days were long in the past. Just over one thousand remained with Fleet Tertius, mostly of Guilliman's line, the pale grey chevron painted over their livery marking them out as unusual when once they had been commonplace. The rest had dispersed. It would not be long, Messinius judged, until these last few would be reassigned, and the grand companies who had awoken from Cawl's cryogenic arks and been unleashed upon the galaxy would be consigned to history.

'Thothven,' Messinius greeted the captain simply. He raised a hand at one of his servants, indicating that Thothven be given wine. When the captain took the goblet from the menial and breathed in its fragrance, he smiled, and gave his thanks.

Thothven was polite to the servant where many would have ignored her. He was a singular man, empathetic, considered, a thinker, unlike his brothers. So many of Cawl's Mars-born had shown little emotion. Messinius had hoped their mental state would develop as they became accustomed to their new lives, but those who had recalled fully what it was to be human were in a minority. However, his misgivings had been dispelled recently. Now, a decade on, the new generation of Primaris warriors raised within a Chapter the old way were coming into full service, and they had the usual emotional range of the Space Marines, which though limited, exceeded that shown by the first of the Primaris.

Even so, a faint suspicion remained at the back of Messinius' mind. Although he had met Cawl several times, and he doubted the archmagos was the sort that coveted power, the thought was never far away, no matter how many times he had seen the Primaris Marines fight, how many victories they had won, that they were beings forged by Archmagos Belisarius Cawl, not by the Emperor, and their loyalties were therefore suspect.

This was a train of thought he should curb. He suspected Cawl, but others in the Imperium suspected Guilliman for his employment of the Primaris legions. Paranoia was an easy vice to fall into.

Thothven helped dispel his fears a touch.

'I apologise for disturbing your rest, my lord,' said Thothven. 'There are too few moments for contemplation.'

‘We are the servants of the Emperor,’ said Messinius. ‘I am grateful for the few moments I had. You report to me directly. Nothing troublesome, I hope.’

‘I was simply in the vicinity. Attending you seemed more polite than sending yet another message. I am sure you have enough of those to last some time.’

‘I do.’

‘The report is short. Greyshield casualties are minimal. Three dead, nineteen wounded, only one of those gravely. There wasn’t that much on this world that could touch us.’

Messinius splashed water over his face. ‘They crumpled. How did they think they could survive without the Imperium, should the enemy have come? Overconfidence is a bigger enemy than the enemy,’ he said.

‘The Antopians hoped to be overlooked, I suppose.’

‘Nobody gets overlooked,’ said Messinius.

‘Nor is hope any sort of shield,’ Thothven said. ‘There are questions among the men, my lord.’

‘About?’

‘The usual. There are not many of us left.’ Thothven tapped the chevron on his pauldron.

‘I still do not know, Thothven, though I suspect the end is close.’

‘I can never decide if I am offended or not,’ said Thothven lightly. ‘Is it a sign of my own competence that I remain a Greyshield, when so many others have moved on to their final posting, or is it the opposite, and I am simply not wanted?’

‘Glibness does not suit you.’

‘I don’t know,’ said Thothven with a shrug. ‘I believe I wear it well.’ He drained his cup, and held it out to be refilled. ‘This wine is not too bad,’ he said, speaking like a man who had a keen sense for viticulture, and who had not spent all but ten of the last five thousand years being fed via direct nutrient assimilation.

‘Do you have anything else to add?’ Messinius asked.

‘A little. Combat efficiency is up. Joint gene-line squads are operating particularly well. It will be a sad day when these formations are broken up. Their kill counts are impressive.’

‘Noted,’ said Messinius. ‘A greater shame is the blood of human men and women you are forced to spill. These brushfire rebellions are tiresome.’

‘A sorrow,’ said Thothven. He almost sounded sincere. There it was, that coldness of the newborns, even in him.

Voices rose in the corridor. Echoey and indistinct to human ears, the Space Marines heard it well enough.

‘A dispute,’ said Thothven.

‘Let them through!’ Messinius shouted.

Several sets of footsteps approached. Selwin’s was among them. He had a particular way of moving, a short, rapid stride, though it was beginning to slow with age. Standard humans lasted such a short run of years.

Selwin entered with a gaggle of fleet functionaries, three mid-rankers of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica, and various factotums. Two carried cloth of gold scrolls dangling from chains on poles, the gleam of the metal making it impossible to read whatever was written on them. Several servo-skulls accompanied the group. The delegation was flustered. Selwin could be ferocious guarding Messinius on the rare times he rested.

‘My apologies, my lord,’ Selwin said, managing to speak before the adepts, which annoyed them. ‘I did not wish to see you disturbed.’

‘My duty is never-ending, Selwin. Not even you can stop it.’

Messinius surveyed the group. They had clawed back a little of their dignity.

‘By the look of you, the message must come at least from the fleetmistress.’

The leader seemed deflated. He looked like he was considering declaiming the very same piece of information anyway, having evidently composed an announcement suitable to the occasion, but opted for a simple nod instead.

‘Yes, my lord.’

‘Go on then, man,’ said Thothven. ‘What does it say?’

‘The lord lieutenant’s eyes only,’ he said apologetically, then cast less apologetic looks at Selwin and Thothven.

‘Clear the room, Selwin. You stay, Thothven.’

The servants withdrew. Most of the delegation left, leaving the adept with a message carrier whose eyes were capped with metal spheres and whose ears had been removed. The adept turned with awkward ceremony and took a brass scroll case from the mutilated man. Holding it reverently before

himself, he walked towards the bath in a contrived, high-stepping manner. Messinius impatiently took the scroll and unrolled it, dripping water on it and making the ink on the finely drawn illuminations run. He read quickly, and frowned.

‘When did this arrive?’ he demanded.

‘Three hours ago.’

‘Why did you not bring it to my attention sooner?’

‘The proper protocols, my lord, the presentation, the verification…’

‘The drawings?’ he said hotly. ‘In future, messages of this import must be brought to me immediately, without adornment.’ Messinius rose from the tub. The adepts averted their eyes.

‘Bad news?’ Thothven asked.

‘It is not a message, it is a summons. Fleet Tertius is to gather together in its entirety for the first time since the crusade began. It is fortunate you are here, Thothven, we leave as soon as is practicable. Selwin!’ he shouted. The steward returned. ‘Summon the general staff. You…’ He pointed to the astropathic delegation. ‘Stay here. There is much to do.’

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Chapter Twelve

BALOR

ZELLOPINE

ZAR QUAESITOR

Hiax and his diminished clade waited tensely as the lifter descended through the shipyards. The carriage was mostly armaglass, and gave awe-inspiring views over the yards and the world of Balor Prime.

Huge polar caps gripped the world top and bottom, in painfully white claws. It was a big world, mostly ocean; less than three hundred parts of Balor were solid land. The islands were crusted with mining facilities, in places scarred by huge open-cast pits visible from space. In orbit, lattices of girders stretched in every direction, putting out long arms at regular intervals to embrace the hulls of ships under repair. The tiny dots of Mechanicus workers moved around the vessels by the thousand, the exhaust of their directional jets offering short-lived plumes to the infinite dark. Larger, brighter dots wove between them – servitor-piloted supply craft, repair drones, and multi-limbed construction craft. The shipyard was new, still expanding above the fat round of the planet. A diffuse glow shone upwards from the world, taking the starkness from the void where atmosphere shaded into vacuum, becoming blue, then bluer still where air met grey ocean.

Balor’s particulars scrolled slowly through Hiax’s mind. Balor had been a god, Hiax recalled. Some ancient and terrible deity who terrorised the peoples of Old Earth in the unimaginable past. That this fact was known to him at all was only because Balor was a popular name for a star, occurring several times on the Cartographica Galaxia. Without thinking he scanned charts detailing Balor Prime’s gravitational pull, low planetary density, atmospheric mix, exacta grading, primary and secondary products, population, and all the rest of the categories of most importance to the Adeptus Terra. Terra’s rapacity for the resources of the Imperium’s worlds was so demanding, every settlement required careful categorisation, lest they pay a tenth of a percentage point less than their due.

What the exacta ratings did not reveal was the pain the world had suffered in recent years. A decade after the Great Rift, and the scars of the Blood Crusade that hit Balor in the early days were still visible on the primary continent. The world had been saved, and remained loyal, though rumour had it that was only down to the whims of dark gods rather than the valiant resistance of the populace. The Neverborn had invaded, destroyed, and vanished.

Then the crusade had come, and Guilliman’s edicts fell over Balor as heavily and stifling as a shroud of mail. The populace had probably welcomed it to begin with, until a new invasion of Administratum bureaucrats and Adeptus Mechanicus personnel arrived. By decree, Balor would not only offer up its ores and people to the ceaseless hunger of the Imperium, but it would also host a new Naval base and shipyards. Balor was a rich system, strategically important before the Rift. It sat at a prominent warp nexus of the Segmentum Pacificus, and had remained so when so many other major routes had shifted. It hosted several inhabited worlds. The yards could have been sited at the fortress world of Celthenn, the better to defend the new assets, or the manufacturing world of Buarain, whose industries could be repurposed and greater population employed to build the ships. But Balor Prime was chosen. When speed was of the essence, it made more sense to locate a shipyard nearest to raw materials and establish new manufactoria and repair facilities than to transport billions of tons of ore across the void. The oceans offered further benefits in the resupply of the ships limping in for repairs.

After centuries of peace, Balor was changing. Its resources would be harvested to fuel mankind's wars. Life would slip away from its seas. There was an imbalance to the Great Work when a living world died, Hiax thought. The requisite resources could be taken from a non-living planet, but taking them from somewhere like Balor was easier because it was easier for men to live there. Mankind would use it up, then move on. He imagined the population might, one day, find the Blood Crusade of less consequence than the damage inflicted by the Imperium. But such was the price of the Machine God's demands. Every world thus consumed was more fuel for the forges where true understanding would be beaten out.

They passed down the mile-long length of a vertical spar, and Hiax saw his goal ease into sight.

The *Zar Quaesitor* stood apart from the shipyard. The stories said it possessed the manufacturing capacity of a small forge world. Hiax had always taken that as hyperbole, but looking at the size of the vessel, he could almost believe it. Real Arks Mechanicus were rare. The name had ceased to be a true designation. Most of the ships so called in those benighted times had been granted the title to reflect the influence of the magos who owned them. The great Arks Mechanicus were confined to history, many lost during the Great Heresy War, the rest dwindling away through accident and misadventure through the following millennia.

Except in the case of a very special few.

The *Zar Quaesitor* was one such vessel.

Cawl's ship was so big it was hard to get a true impression of its scale. Hiax brought his implants into play, applying geometrical measures to give him an exact read-out of its size, but that did little for the feel of the thing. It was squat, round-bellied, its hull open to the void where hangars and manufactory slots broke up the expanses of metal. A long spine that flattened the top ran to a long, beak-like prow. This part of the structure protruded far from the hull, and Hiax had heard it was a lander itself, though given the size of it he thought the classification ungenerous; only the drop-cathedrals of the Collegia Titanica and mega-landers of the Astra Militarum were larger.

So close, but still far. Tantalising, he thought, in the worst of all senses. There was no guarantee Cawl would see him.

The lifter’s voxmitters crackled out a flat fanfare so degraded it must have been captured a millennium ago. The lifter stopped. The doors opened upon a second group of four tech-priests, all heavily augmented. Like Hiax’s clade, their robes were the orange and grey of Ryza.

‘Gre–’ Hiax managed. It was as far as he got.

‘What by the holy forge fanes of mother Mars do you think you are playing at, contacting me, Magos Perscrutor Camalin Hiax 43-Tau-Omicron?’ Zellopine’s words rasped out of an emitter hidden in his thorax. His face was a wall of banded metal, studded with four eyes that flashed angrily as he spoke. Mechasapient Zellopine jabbed an accusing finger at Hiax. ‘Do you realise the level of scrutiny I’ll be put under for deciding to meet with you? This is not going to look good for me, Hiax. I cannot afford to associate myself with renegades.’

‘It’s very pleasing to see you again too, Zellopine.’

‘You’re offensive as always.’ The local noosphere filled with ready commands. The other magi levelled their weapon arms. This wasn’t a welcoming committee.

<Your actions are–>

‘Don’t use the noosphere, for the Omnissiah’s sake!’ said Zellopine. ‘The less on record about this, the better.’

Hiax began again, verbally this time. ‘Magos Zellopine, there is no need for this aggression. Is it not excessive using such high-ranking members of the Cult for security work?’

‘They will not talk. Servitors can be suborned. Those less high in the Cult can be bribed. We have common interests.’

‘With me?’

‘If I am removed from my position here, they will likely follow, so yes, with you.’ He spoke to his fellows. ‘Watch the magos perscrutor’s clade. Take them to the third-level supply room, keep them under guard until Hiax returns.’

‘Query,’ burbled Osel-den. ‘In the event that Magos Perscrutor Hiax does not return, what then?’

‘I am sure you maintain an imagination within your intelligence cores,’ said Zellopine.

Osel-den paled. Chul-phi growled. The artisans were heavily armed, but Hiax would not wager on them in a straight fight with the myrmidons.

‘Do as he says,’ Hiax said. ‘I assume that in spite of your unpleasant behaviour, you are going to take me to see the archmagos?’

Zellopine waited until Osel-den and Chul-phi had been shepherded away before he answered.

‘Of course I am. That’s how blackmail is supposed to work, isn’t it?’

Zellopine took Hiax through the shipyard. He was blocking Hiax’s access to the facility infosphere, but Hiax had eyes and saw that Zellopine had chosen a storage complex of the kind rarely frequented. Warehousing and stores for Naval resupply needed minimal personnel, and it was patrolled by mindless servitors. The few full sentients he saw were officials of the Departmento Munitorum, and they paid the two magi little attention.

‘You are trying hard not to be noticed,’ said Hiax.

‘Shut up,’ said Zellopine.

He took Hiax to a small airlock that led into a two-man maintenance pod. The pair of them were bulky with augmetics, and the pod, which was designed for lay-serfs, was barely big enough to accommodate them. Mechanical limbs entangled with uncomfortable intimacy. Their metal faces came close.

Zellopine stabbed a data spike into an input port and launched the little craft.

‘Once this is over, we’re through, you and I.’

Hiax felt an unaccustomed sense of amusement. ‘Are you worried that I might tell someone about your brief flirtation with xenotech, magos?’

‘Do not be obtuse! You know that is exactly what I am worried about!’ Zellopine said. ‘This is it. No more favours. Your name is two bad modus from the scroll of the damned. I can’t afford to be associated with you. Hereteks like you drag everyone down with them.’

‘One might put the suggestion forward that you should have considered that before approaching me for the procurement of that–’

‘Silence!’ Zellopine said again, accompanying his command with an angry squeal of binharic. He accelerated the craft. Hiax’s organs shifted in their armoured jars. ‘I am lucky the great Cawl shows so much interest in you.’

‘He knows I’m coming?’

‘Yes, the Divine Conduit knows you are coming!’ Zellopine said angrily. ‘He doesn’t agree to see just anyone.’

‘I suspected you might simply put me aboard the *Zar Quaesitor* and hope for the best.’

‘The best would be if you never came. But you are here, and he will see you. The Omnissiah alone knows why he agreed to this.’

‘Fortunate for both of us,’ said Hiax.

‘Better for me.’

Under Zellopine’s direction, the craft began to slow. Gravimetric sensors in Hiax’s torso registered the huge mass of the *Zar Quaesitor* approaching.

‘Don’t mention me. Don’t even think about telling him how we know each other. I have a high position in these shipyards. This assignment could lead on to great things. You are not to impede my progress towards true comprehension.’

‘I have no intention of doing that,’ said Hiax. ‘The labours of one further the knowledge of all. This is favour enough. You serve the Omnissiah well by helping me, though I doubt you will believe that.’

The craft docked.

‘I don’t care. I don’t ever want to see you again.’

‘Goodbye, then.’

‘The files.’

‘What?’

‘Your mem-files. I want them destroyed, now.’

‘You are serious?’

‘If you do not destroy them, then how do I know you will not return and coerce me anew?’

Hiax gave out an irritated bleep. ‘Very well. Prepare to receive datacast.’

His systems presented him with the relevant recordings. He allowed his mind to touch upon them, reliving the moment Zellopine had come to him, sixteen years ago, looking for a certain something he should not have coveted.

He sent the packet of data.

‘Form communion,’ Zellopine demanded. ‘I want to watch you remove the recollections from your datasets.’

‘Very well.’ Hiax allowed a bridge to be formed, mind to mind, a form of machine telepathy. He allowed Zellopine access only long enough to witness the destruction of the requested information, then abruptly severed the connection, jolting them both with noospheric feedback.

‘Happy?’ Hiax said.

‘Happiness is a redundant social construct,’ Zellopine said. ‘But yes, I am. Now get out and let me be.’

The pod door hissed back into its housing. There was a puff of higher pressure as the *Zar Quaesitor* breathed out into the pod. The mix smelled of hot metal and biologic suspension fluids. It was like coming home.

Hiax stepped through into the airlock. ‘You are not coming with me?’

‘Not a chance,’ said Zellopine. ‘Farewell forever, Magos Perscrutor Camalin Hiax 43-Tau-Omicron.’

The airlock door closed. Hiax heard the pod depart. He attempted to open the inner door, but its machine spirit refused, responding with a complicated explanation in Lingua Technis of the decontamination process he was to undergo. It repeated itself in binharic, High Gothic, then Low Gothic.

Hiax waited patiently for the decontamination protocols to cease. They were not unusual, and in this case probably a legacy of Cawl’s work creating the Primaris Space Marines.

The machine spirit demanded his name and his business. Hiax provided both. He was scanned. He waited, and for a second he feared he would not be allowed entrance, and would be vented out into the void. He’d survive that, of course, but it would not be pleasant.

Just as he was bracing for ejection, the inner door opened, and Hiax passed into the *Zar Quaesitor*. A long corridor led through the thickness of the hull into the internal spaces. Several blast doors guarded the way. Each one passed a scanning beam over him as he approached, slammed up into the ceiling, and closed just as quickly once he had crossed their thresholds. Automated weapons mounted on ball-joints tracked his progress. The last door opened, and he found himself in a broader corridor running at right angles to the airlock access, and curved to follow the contours of the ship.

A parsimonious amount of red light lit the place just enough to see by. The smells of industry grew stronger, but there was a sense of staleness there, as if the air-mix had not been filtered recently.

The corridor was, however, occupied. The biggest Space Marine Hiax had ever seen waited for him, so huge his head was only an inch or two from scraping along the ceiling. He wore battered grey power armour with no markings. His bald scalp was blotchy with scar tissue, but it was the eyes

that caught his attention, glinting in the weak light, so profoundly sad, Hiax found it difficult to look into them.

‘You are Magos Camalin Hiax 43-Tau-Omicron,’ the giant said. ‘I am Primus. You will follow me.’

He turned around without waiting for a response. Hiax had no choice but to follow.

The Space Marine refused all attempts at conversation. To every question Hiax put, he responded with the sole, dolorous phrase: ‘That is of no consequence.’ And then he ceased to provide even that, so Hiax stopped trying. He had hoped to see some of the ship’s marvels, but his guide led him far from any of the manufactoria or forges that took up most of the *Zar Quaesitor*’s volume. It would have been something, he thought, to have seen the laboratories where the Primaris Space Marines themselves were nurtured. Cawl had accomplished the greatest work any could remember, right here.

Hiax got to see none of it. His guide seemed intent on preserving the ship’s secrets. They saw only serfs, tech-thralls and servitors. Disappointed, Hiax settled in for a long, boring walk.

Cawl’s ship seemed even bigger on the inside. Though they walked quickly, Hiax was only able to keep up with the Space Marine’s rapid pace thanks to his four tireless, metal legs. They took lifters and monorails where available, but it was still a full half-hour before Primus stopped before a nondescript door and opened it with a wave of his gauntleted hand.

‘The Necron Archive. The archmagos is awaiting you within.’

The Space Marine departed without another word.

The archive was huge and dark. The ceiling was a long way overhead and the place poorly lit. It was impossible to see on the visible spectrum, though Hiax perceived its vaulting and catwalks in the subtle greys of infrared. Green light glimmered from pieces of alien machinery. Deeper in, there was a glow of lumen light, the clatter of someone at work, and soft, melancholy music.

Hiax sent out a tentative data blurt, but got nothing in reply. The ship’s noosphere was accessible, but all the ingress nodes were tightly closed.

‘Hello?’ he called.

Whoever was in there didn’t answer. Humming joined the music.

Hiax went further within.

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Chapter Thirteen

THE NECRON ARCHIVE

RATIONAL ABOMINATIONS

SCIRUDAE

Junkyard would have been a more appropriate name for the Necron Archive. Hiax walked between piles of xenotech that were either priceless or heretekal, depending what sect of the Cult one followed.

The artefacts were only roughly grouped. Close to the entrance was a collection of stasis capsules; some broken, some pristine, some still holding the remains of necron foot soldiers. They were arranged without order, in huddles. All of them were covered in dust. A little further in was a score or more large monuments, past them chunks of noctilith machinery on plasteel pallets stacked thirty high. A jumble of inert necrons, unsorted by type, livery, or any other method Hiax could guess at, lurked beyond them. There were pieces of buildings, vehicles, weapons, whole mechanisms, components, and machines that blended together human, necron and other xenos technologies in the most haphazard of ways.

Hiax goggled at this wealth of information and blasphemy. Here was enough alien material to keep a magos busy for several human lifetimes, or to condemn him for the same. He wasn’t looking where he was going, distracted by an intact phase generator several magi he knew would pay

dearly to get their hands on, when he banged into something hard, and looked up into the severe face of a heavy necron war-form. He stifled a yelp, before he realised that it was inert, one of seven in various states of disrepair mounted on wheeled bases. After that he paid a little more attention to his path.

Cawl was in an open space some way into the room. How far in, Hiax could not say. The walls were lost to distance and disorder. Artefacts were heaped up around the archmagos in precarious piles. There were large arc lumens surrounding the operating table he crouched over, and upon the table was the body of a necron from one of their technomancer castes.

The top of the technomancer's head had been neatly sawed off. From the innards spilled so many cables it looked like a comical shock of hair. The cables were linked to a bank of cogitators. Cawl leaned over the open cranium, fine tools held in his two principal hands prodding delicately within. A flock of servo-skulls buzzed around him. The archmagos dominus was far bigger than Hiax, but because Cawl carried no wargear, and his original body was therefore somewhat exposed, Hiax saw him as a feeble morsel of flesh in isolation from his extensive bionics. He seemed a hunched old man, so buried in metal he resembled the junk piles around him.

Music played. Cawl hummed along in a bizarre sort of way. His augmitters produced a perfect facsimile of various instruments, that he braided into and around the recording, increasing its complexity, but he sang also with his human voice, and that was scratchy and not quite in key, spoiling the effect. Then he stopped, letting the music play on alone, an ethereal collection of stringed instruments Hiax could not name. Cawl's carriage clanked. He rose up a few feet. His ancient human torso half turned.

'Magos Camalin Hiax, I presume?' Cawl said.

Hiax bowed. 'Oh great and most knowledgeable Prime Conduit, it is with great humility that I greet you in your–'

'Yes, yes,' said Cawl, and waved his sole human hand over his shoulder – the left, its skin parchment-pale and thin. The hand and his face were the only organic parts visible. 'No need for all that.'

Cawl turned back to his work.

'Where was I, where was I, where was I? I do so hate interruption. Hmmm.' Cawl bent over his experiment. 'If you will indulge me, Hiax, I

believe I may have solved this little conundrum. I did think I would be finished by the time you got here, but I overestimated the time it would take, so I apologise. I shall be with you in a moment.'

'Not at all,' said Hiax. 'It is a great honour to watch you–'

'Shhhh,' said Cawl, holding a finger to age-thin lips. 'I'm concentrating. Now, here we go. This goes in here, that goes in there.' His mechadendrites darted in and out of the skull, their fine manipulators making *snickety snickety* sounds around the tools in his hands as they attached wires to various unseen points in the necron's consciousness matrix. 'And finally, this goes in here. Yes?' he asked himself. He nodded. 'Yes.'

He took his hands out of the skull, and stood up tall, his back uncurling, and the impression of frailty was gone. Cawl's many mechadendrites pinned the wires in place.

'By the all-powerful Machine God, His avatar on the material plane, the Omnissiah, and the ever-present motive force, I beseech you to aid me in my understanding. I ask that…' He stopped. 'Do we need to bother with this? Shall we just get on with it? I'm never entirely convinced of the efficacy of prayer.'

Cawl held up his primary hands, one metal, one flesh, and ostentatiously crossed his fingers, then winked over his shoulder at Hiax.

'This works just as well. Activate the machines!'

Somewhere, tech-priests chanted, evidently more invested in the proper rites than Cawl, but they were far away and Hiax could not pinpoint their location.

There came the pulsing of powerful mechanisms, and the cogitators attached to the technomancer's skull spooled up into violent, bustling life. Further back in the darkness, a pair of necron devices wired together shot lightning back and forth at one another, illuminating the room for many yards with phantasmal green light that invested the broken necrons with a disturbing semblance of life.

'Behold, the power of the living motive force!' Cawl cackled, and Hiax had the impression he wasn't being entirely serious. 'Commence data extraction.'

The necron's eyes blazed green, and it let out a wild, inarticulate howl. Metal scraped on metal, as clawed hands clenched, ripping up curls of plasteel.

‘Oops, I wasn’t expecting that,’ said Cawl. ‘Perhaps I should have restrained it.’ He took a step back. His servo-skulls retreated behind him.

The necron looked Hiax dead in the face and began shouting outraged gibberish.

‘Hmmm, I wasn’t expecting that either,’ said Cawl. ‘Maybe I should have brought some kind of weapon too.’

The necron moved no further, just raged incoherently at them as phosphorescent green light guttered in its open brain pan. Cawl turned to the cogitators. Needles danced back and forth on dials. A screen displayed a column that filled from the bottom.

‘The data is inloading!’ Cawl said excitedly. ‘It’s working, finally!’

There was a thunderous discharge of power, and the technomancer sagged upon the table. The machinery cut out, the dials dropped back to their retaining pins, and the whine of power generation died away to nothing. Some sort of fluid was dripping loudly from the necron’s skull. A jet of sparks shot out from the back of one of the cogitators. The smell of burning circuitry filled the room.

‘Drat it,’ said Cawl, coughing. ‘I honestly thought I had it that time.’ He looked disappointedly at the black smoke boiling from the necron’s head. ‘Another perfectly good cryptek wasted.’ He scuttled back to the operating table and began to draw out the wires. ‘Such a shame.’ He turned again to look at Hiax. ‘I suppose you are wondering what exactly I am trying to achieve here, yes? I have some insight already into the operations of necron machinery. You can see that, I am sure, from the various experiments contained in this archive.’ Several mechadendrites withdrew themselves from the skull to point at lumps of modified necron technology. ‘Although I have achieved a great deal of progress, I am almost entirely restricted to direct manipulation. This is crude, as I am sure you can see, and not at all how the machinery is intended to be used by its creators.’

Although Cawl seemed to want a response, he gave no space to Hiax to reply, talking quickly as he worked.

‘The necrons themselves use certain higher-dimensional sciences to operate their own machines. What I am trying to retrieve is a full set of subdimensional coding patterns so that I can fully utilise the necrons’ own carrier systems. With that, you see, I would be able to control more of their systems myself. I am already familiar with some of the techniques, but if I

just had a little more I am sure I would be able to unravel the whole of their technology. Imagine! To bend their marvellous scarabs to our will, or to manipulate the laws of space and time with little effort. We might tame the warp. What do you think of that?'

Impossible, that's what Hiax thought. Cawl's fondness for his own voice excused Hiax from explaining this awkward opinion.

'Extracting the required data is, alas, proving troublesome.' He looked sadly at the metal giant laid upon the slab. 'I was sure I could acquire the necessary engrammatical circuits from this specimen, and then decode them for my own use, but once again I am foiled by their security protocols.'

'Mortis switches,' Hiax said, inserting his words into the microsecond Cawl left before inevitably starting to speak again.

'Yes! Yes.' Cawl was pleased by this minimal input. 'You are familiar with their ways, I see. The problem here is that the necrons have so many failsafes. I thought I had it this time, I really did. And yet, no. The contents of this cryptek's head are so much bubbled slag. I will gain nothing from it.'

Cawl put down his tools on a metal tray, neatly in line with many more. Two servitors activated in their sudden, lumbering way and rumbled forward on hard wheels.

'Put it with the rest,' said Cawl. 'Such a shame.'

The servitors dragged the technomancer off the table with little care. Its long limbs clashed from the deck, and they let it scrape along the ground as they dragged it to a pile of broken machines, which they tossed it upon with an equal lack of care.

Cawl's mechadendrites whipped back into their nest. He wiped alien oils from his hands with a greasy rag. For such an augmented being, he seemed peculiarly human, at odds with the myth of the man. Belisarius Cawl was disappointing, not the titanic Omnissian saint Hiax had expected.

'What I really need is a living cryptek.' Cawl's chuckle was amplified by his mandibular implant so that it echoed around the archive. 'Or an unliving one, that might be a more appropriate term, seeing as they are not actually alive. But active. You follow my meaning, yes? A working example.'

'How would you get the information from a functional specimen? Would the same problem not arise?'

'Well, yes, it would,' Cawl agreed.

'Then how would you get the data you require?'

‘By switching methodology,’ said Cawl.

‘What method would you use?’

‘By asking it!’ said Cawl, in a jolly tone that suggested he thought Hiax pleasant but dim. ‘Have you ever spoken with one? I mean, an active, thinking, reasoning abomination?’

‘No,’ said Hiax, appalled by the thought. He’d used their technology, but listen to their lies? ‘Never,’ he said firmly.

‘I have spoken with them. They are abominable, as the classification suggests, but as xenos go, they are quite fascinating. I encountered one of their rulers during my attempts to stabilise the pylon systems of Cadia, which alas also proved unsuccessful, but he was almost… charming in his way.’ Cawl gave him a conspiratorial wink. ‘A little frightening, too, between you and me. He wanted to whisk me off and put me into some kind of zoological garden, can you imagine? Only my superior negotiating skills saved me.’

‘Is that why you have all of this?’ said Hiax, looking around once more at the heaps of technology. Every time he looked, he noticed more details, more treasures. There was so much of it.

‘Yes, no. I’ve been collecting this for… oh, two or three thousand years, I think. I knew it would come in useful eventually. I’ve holds full of this stuff, and more, from all different kinds of xenos, so I suppose I’m not really very much different to that monster Trazyn. I only brought my attention to it fully recently, when the Primaris project came closer to its conclusion. You see, all this was a bit of a side project. I took notice of the discoveries of necron remains as they were initially made, and more notice once it became so obvious how prevalent they were. Obviously, when they began to stir up it became rather more pressing. I am in the process of cataloguing this material, if only I could remember where I got half of it from. That would be significantly easier, and speed my progress.’ Cawl looked around the archive with the air of a man who has a task he does not quite know how to start. ‘Ten thousand years is a long time to live. I’ve suffered mind-wipes, catastrophic memory losses… If you can name a form of data corruption, then sadly I have suffered it. I do try to get around it, but I have a propensity for backing up my considerable number of memcores then misplacing the backups. I am rather like a squirrel of Old Earth,

secreting his treasures of nuts all through the forest to sustain him through the winter, and forgetting where they are.'

'A squirrel?' Camalin Hiax had no idea what a squirrel was. He looked at Cawl's enormously augmented centauroid body, and imagined a terrible beast of prodigious size.

'Yes. A squirrel. Do you know, most members of the Sciuridae family had appalling memories? They relied on smell to find what they had hidden. I am somewhat the same, I suppose.' He frowned. 'I learned that somewhere, though I no longer recall where. Don't worry. I only retain knowledge that I have verified, so we can be more or less certain it is true, no?'

'I do not comprehend, archmagos.'

'Never mind. I am over ten thousand years old, and prone to forgetfulness. That is the point.' Cawl scuttled over to a pile of severed necron warriors' heads and plucked one up with one of his larger manipulators. He cradled it for a moment, staring into its eyes. It was truly ancient, pitted with some sort of corrosion. Cawl tossed it aside. 'Sometimes that forgetfulness is enforced,' he said. 'Now, to you.'

'You agreed to see me.'

'I did.'

'Why?' asked Hiax.

'Straight to the point. Admirable. There are a number of reasons. Let's deal with the first, and that is the warning you sent a decade ago to Terra, of a strange phenomenon afflicting ships traversing the Nephilim Sector. Do you recall?'

'I am not so forgetful as you.'

Cawl laughed at that.

'I thought my notification had been lost,' said Hiax. 'I had no indication that it had been received, and I have been involved in researching the Nephilim Anomaly ever since.'

Cawl moved his head from side to side equivocally. 'Lost? They all arrive at Terra, these desperate pleas for help. It's what happens to them afterwards that is the real problem. So you could say it was lost, for a while. Then the most peculiar thing happened.' He looked over at Hiax, and though his mouth was hidden by his huge mandibular augmetic, Hiax could see the smile around his eyes. 'Do you believe in the Omnissiah, Hiax?'

Camalin was taken aback. ‘What sort of question is that? I am a faithful servant of Mars!’

Cawl chuckled indulgently. ‘I am sure you perform all your rites with the greatest probity. I am less convinced of the need for them myself, but each to their own.’

‘You’re a Prime Conduit. You must believe!’

‘I believe alright. The Machine God is all around us, all the time. In fact, yes, that’s the crux of it, isn’t it?’ He affected a thoughtful expression and tapped his augmetic mask with a long, metal finger. ‘What I am driving at is the difference between faith and belief. You may say that any distinction that could be made between the two would be somewhat quibbling, and you would be right. Furthermore, your protests would be justified because the definitions of both are flexible, as much as they overlap, you would probably – and rightfully – insist.’

Hiax listened; he had no choice. He had not objected nor offered opinion, either verbally or noospherically. Cawl wouldn’t give him the chance. Hiax had the sudden idea that he wasn’t strictly necessary to the conversation. He could imagine the archmagos sitting all alone in the dark, surrounded by piles of dead xenos heads, arguing with himself. It wasn’t unheard of for powerful magi to duplicate their minds or don different personalities depending on their mood.

‘So, in light of your objections…’ Cawl paused. ‘You agree with the objections I have assumed you would provide? It is a drawback of my intellect that I am so accurate in divining what my interlocutors might say, I often don’t allow them the time to speak for themselves, and that means occasionally, and I do mean only rarely, I misjudge their state of mind. I have to check myself, otherwise I can go racing off down entirely the wrong logic path.’ He looked at Hiax expectantly.

‘What?’

‘Am I accurate in my assumptions?’ Cawl said slowly. ‘Would you agree with our discourse, as I have predicted it?’

Hiax thought a moment. Cawl’s presumptive monologue was annoying, but it was, more or less, correct. He would have raised those objections, had he been given the chance.

‘Yes,’ he admitted grudgingly.

‘Very good. Then let me provide definitions to the difference between faith and belief,’ said Cawl. ‘Faith is an encompassing feeling, a certainty that binds the components of a man’s soul together as surely as the active chemical agent in an aggregate construction material catalyses to create an indivisible solid out of many elements. A faithful man accepts that there is a Machine God, and that His will must be enacted. But faith is passive. It is unreflective. It is a comfort to the faithful, I might say unchallenging. One can live a faithful life without ever truly, really believing, because faith requires no reflection. Belief, on the contrary, is dynamic.’ Cawl jabbed with a metal finger. ‘It demands action, or rather interaction, with the deity. Belief supposes an equal dynamism on the part of the worshipped and the worshipper. A little give and take. So let me rephrase, you have faith that the Machine God exists, but do you believe He sees you, that He guides you?’

Cawl slithered closer, reared up, then peered closely at Hiax.

‘Go on,’ he prompted. ‘I have ceased speaking for a period of time commensurate with the usual social norms designed to elicit a response.’

Hiax’s confusion clouded the noosphere.

‘You are permitted to speak. Do so.’

‘I suppose I believe…’ Hiax stopped himself. Did he believe in the sense that Cawl meant? Had the Machine God made him take an interest in xenos machines, put him in a position where he would be discovered and disgraced? The Machine God knew all, so He at least knew that. From that point of view, it was His fault. ‘I have never considered it, not truly. He works through His machines. Does He also work directly through our hand? Are we His tools?’

Cawl beamed. ‘Now that is the question to answer my question. I tell you that He does. The central tenet of our faith is that the Machine God requires us to exist in His universe and to ultimately comprehend it. That is the test He sets us. But sometimes, I think, He steps in and gives us a little push in one direction or another. A little inspiration to a struggling technoarchaeologist. A sudden desire in the head of a datasapient to dig into one archive over another. That sort of thing.’

‘What does that have to do with my report? Are you saying that the Machine God intervened somehow?’

‘Something very peculiar happened to your report. I have read it, by the way, along with the two thousand, one hundred and forty-five other reports that arrived at the same place, at the same time, on the same subject. These reports all warned of the growth of a dead zone, centred on the Nephilim Sector, or the effects on the populace of the worlds therein, or both. What is even more peculiar than their simultaneous arrival, is that the reports were all sent to the desk of a certain low-ranking adept named Fabian Guelphrain. Does that name mean anything to you?’

‘No. Should it?’

‘Only if the acquisition of all knowledge is any sort of ambition for you!’ said Cawl, with mock pomposity. ‘Guelphrain was chosen as one of the founding members of Lord Guilliman’s historitor organisation.’

Hiax was unfamiliar with historitors. He data-canted a query.

‘Right. They’re not important,’ Cawl responded verbally. ‘What is important is that all of these messages arrived, en masse, despite the difficulties the organisation of the Adeptus Administratum places in the way of efficiency, good sense, and dare I say it, sanity, upon the desk of a man who had just been chosen directly by Roboute Guilliman, in a similarly unlikely manner, I must say, from what I hear of Guelphrain. That does rather suggest some sort of divine intervention, do you not think?’

‘It didn’t work, though, did it?’ Hiax said. ‘If I infer your meaning correctly, this man, Guelphrain, left before the messages arrived.’

‘This is true. But the Omnissiah moves mysteriously. I’m here now. And you’re here now, and the primarch is coming. Who knows what plans the Machine God has for us? We must only do our best to divine His intentions, and follow accordingly. What is pertinent is that your report is one of many regarding the Nephilim Anomaly. The sheer number and manner of their delivery prompted the primarch to despatch Battle Group Kallides to the anomaly, and when that subsequently went missing, it all led to us, you and me, being here on the cusp of one of the largest military actions in human history.’

‘You’re telling me that the primarch is going to attack the anomaly?’

‘I don’t think you have to hunt between the data strands to discern that meaning,’ chuckled Cawl. ‘All because of divine providence. By the three in one.’

‘By the three in one,’ Hiax repeated dutifully.

‘I have looked into you, Magos Hiax. I think you may understand that we face many threats as a species. There is the Great Enemy, of course, which threatens all of the Great Work. Some say that the followers of darkness wish to pitch the galaxy into the warp, others that Abaddon desires to rule mankind, and uses the warp as a tool. There are others who wish to create a Dark Imperium, dedicated to those sentient, tempestuous cankers of ossified emotion that twist the fabric of the warp. The range of opinions, ambitions and desires held by the followers of Chaos is, well, rather chaotic. Why should they have one goal? Do we?’

‘You would be better placed to answer that than I, archmagos.’

Cawl kept on talking. ‘It’s a wonder that after the Great Rift opened, the Warmaster has not moved on Terra. I imagine getting all his servants going in the same direction is a little like herding cats.’

Hiax had as much idea what a cat was as he did a squirrel.

‘Elsewhere, we find other threats, existential threats. The necrons rise in huge numbers, which is a knotty issue, as they are as opposed to Chaos as we are, and should by the old law of the enemy of my enemy being my friend, be our friends. They have aided us in the past. Yet we must defy them, or they will surely enslave or destroy us all, though the two options of allying with them and exterminating them are not mutually exclusive, by any means. That is not even to include the tyranids, which pose an existential threat to the entire galaxy. We are caught between three poles of annihilation,’ he said, and laughed, a mechanical, affected ‘haha’. ‘We may choose between having our souls consumed by Chaos, having our bodies consumed by extra-galactic xenos, or if the necrons get their way, some terrible combination of the twain. And that leaves aside upstart new empires, ancient, grudge-bearing races, breakaway human factions and the perennial annoyance of the ork.

‘On the other hand,’ said Cawl, proffering one of his many other hands, ‘the necrons may prove to be our greatest hope. You are a student of their technologies.’

Hiax, who was keeping up with Cawl’s discourse but feeling somewhat browbeaten, could see no point in denying his own sins. ‘I am.’

‘Then, if I may share a small blasphemy with you, I have come to believe that the necron understanding of the ars technologica is far superior to our own, in every way I have yet explored. Indeed, I would be bold enough to

admit, if only in this confidential moment to you personally, that their grasp of science…' He paused, frowned, laced fingers together, ancient flesh knotted with oily metal. 'You are not uncomfortable with this word?'

'The word "science" is not favoured.'

'It is not, but it should be, for it is only the exploration of the Machine God's great work by other means than archaeotechnological exploitation of our ancestors' knowledge. Active, experimental processes that bring new knowledge. The examination of cause and effect, the application of empirical testing. Science!' He spoke with a new passion. 'The old tool of rationality so despised in this superstitious era. It is the greatest gift of our ancestors, yet we blindly ignore it.'

There were two versions of Cawl circulating among the Cult's collective consciousness. The first was a hero, the saviour of the Imperium who had returned a primarch to life and crafted armies of novel kind. The other was a raging heretek, who was regarded as such for having done exactly the same things. Hiax realised then that the more extreme opinions held about Belisarius Cawl's methodology were not only true, but underplayed. The man was an out-and-out heretek. And to think he, Camalin Hiax, had been enforced modus penitential for showing a mild interest in xenotech! It was one rule for the influential, another for the rest of them. The unfairness of it all mildly depressed him.

'I am aware of the proscribed practices, yes.'

Cawl took a scuttled step back. 'Proscribed? You say that in a manner that makes me think you agree with their proscribing. How disappointing. I hoped to find a fellow mind in you.'

'We are not the same.'

'I rebut your assertion,' said Cawl.

'I refute your rebuttal,' Hiax said, offended.

'Let's deconstruct this then, shall we? Why are you interested in xenotech? It is regarded as a blasphemy majoris when pursued with your avidity. You are lucky to have been so mildly sanctioned.'

'I was set up,' Hiax said flatly.

'Don't all criminals say that?' said Cawl. 'Answer honestly. Whether or not you were treated fairly, you were pursuing technologica perdita. Despite your condemnation of my methods, I have been assigned the holy status of Prime Conduit of the Omnissiah. You are bound to answer. I am of higher

rank.’ This was not technically, completely true – no tech-priest was obliged to obey another blindly – but it was true enough.

‘I study xenotech the better to understand the knowledge of our most holy ancestors, when they basked fully warmed by the regard of the Machine God,’ Hiax said.

‘Yes, yes, before the Age of Strife and the fall and all that,’ said Cawl, waving Hiax’s faith away with one flexible appendage. ‘So, you say you study xenotech to rediscover humanity’s lost power. By comparison, yes? By extrapolation?’

‘It is not the same thing.’

‘Don’t lie! You do, you do! That’s exactly it. Like you, I study xenotech. Unlike you, I engage in novel experimentation, this “science” that makes you so afraid. Like you, I attempt to reconstruct the glorious knowledge of the past. The path of the Great Work does not change. That is the Machine God’s greatest gift to us – the puzzle of His creation. The intrusions of the warp excepted, the material aspect of the Great Work is eternal. Its laws remain the same, the outcomes of the application of forces remain the same. Ergo, one might rediscover what has been lost by recreating our ancestors’ marvels, not by simply digging them up from the mud,’ he stressed scornfully. ‘I have some fascinating experiments with sealed STC systems that I could share with you. It might change your…’

Hiax’s auditory receptors buzzed with Cawl’s relentless monologue, his datacore overheating as it tried to process these heresies. Hiax had had enough, and he dared break into the archmagos’ stream of speech. ‘What is it you want with me, archmagos?’

Cawl stopped. Blade-legs clicked. His voice changed with the topic.

‘I wondered if you might be interested in joining my conclave, for a while,’ he said. ‘You have a good deal of relevant experience. I could use you.’

‘You don’t want to know why I came to you? It was me who came to you,’ Hiax said. He suddenly doubted himself.

‘Yes, you initiated contact. What did you have over your friend, by the way, to convince him to make the introduction?’

Hiax still retained his organic memories of the event, inferior though they were. He’d struggle to prove Zellopine’s crime with just those.

‘He wanted a necron power module.’

‘Hah! How ironic. But to answer your question,’ said Cawl. ‘You have seen one of their pylon seeding ships. You’ve come to tell me about it. You have surmised that it is by this method that the necrons are expanding the nexus so rapidly.’

Hiax stood uncomfortably. He liked to think himself the master of his own destiny most of the time, and perhaps he’d been away from the hierarchies of the forge worlds for so long, he’d come to actually believe it. With Cawl he felt far out of his depth.

‘Yes,’ he said finally. ‘That is why I am here.’ He felt a little sulky to have his purpose so easily guessed. This wasn’t going at all as he had expected.

‘Will you share?’

‘Here is my testimony.’

He wrapped a data packet and cast it at Cawl. The archmagos accepted, going rigid for the split second it took him to relive Hiax’s experiences on the necron sentinel world.

‘Yes. Yes, I see,’ said Cawl to himself. ‘You are not the first to see a vessel like this. The Pariah Nexus, what the great and good in the Imperium still insist on referring to as the Nephilim Anomaly, is growing in size, and where it existed already, it is growing in strength. In a certain sense, it is growing in *depth*.’ He leaned in close again. ‘I have seen it. I have seen its power. I witnessed it before, with the Phaeron Trazyn in the catacombs under Cadia, but that was old, dreadfully, dreadfully old. I never thought they could enact something on this scale again. To be perfectly honest with you, their power frightens me.’

‘This is heresy,’ said Hiax. ‘I had expected–’

‘What? A Prime Conduit should spout endless dogma? Not I. That is precisely why I am a Prime Conduit, my dear fellow, do you see? It probably led me close to damnation working with that abomination, but we did nearly save Cadia together. Nearly.’ He looked regretful. ‘So close, but I learned a lot. The effect of an active pylon network on the spiritual element of the human organism is horrifying. I saw it, and I felt it. This is why the necrons can move against us with so little resistance. This is why Battle Group Kallides has vanished. They may be dead, for all I know, and they would not be able to reach us even if they were not. The stilling cripples warp travel and stops astrotelepathy. I had hoped the necrons wished to drive Chaos’ influence from the galaxy. And of course they do, but it

doesn’t stop there. They won’t stop until they rule everything. It is to be expected. They are xenos, after all.’

‘So, what, you wish to destroy the network?’

‘Not quite, my new friend. If you accept my offer, then you will hear that a lot from the others, from the primarch too, I expect – destroy the pylons, throw down the unclean, kill the xenos and so forth. But I have another opinion. The Pariah Networks employed by the necrons are like all other technologies. They are not bad in themselves. Technology is morally neutral. It is the use it is put to that is either good or bad. Pylons held the galaxy together for who knows how long, and even when the aeldari fell and broke open the Eye of Terror with their decadent practices…’

‘What, wait, they did?’

‘It’s a long story,’ said Cawl, once more waving away Hiax’s concerns. ‘Even after that, the pylons held that awful wound on the skin of reality in check, until Abaddon began to destroy them. The technology is useful to us. Here it is simply… misapplied. In the right place, I believe the necrons’ pylons will be our salvation. This is my current area of research. Trazyn condescended to me, but he taught me more than he intended to. I am very close to replicating the physical aspects of their technology. With the command coding, we shall be able to close the Great Rift.’

‘You are mocking me,’ said Hiax. ‘What you suggest is not possible.’

‘I often joke, it is true, but not in this instance. It is possible, and I can do it.’

‘You’re not going to break the anomaly…’

‘I am going to steal it,’ said Cawl, finishing Hiax’s sentence with a wild grin and a flourishing of limbs. ‘What do you say, are you interested? If we are to be completely honest with one another, it’s either this or you go back to being exploited by the Ryzans. I can promise you quite the adventure, if that makes the idea any more palatable.’

Hiax nearly turned around and walked out there and then. He had hoped for a holy man, but found that Cawl was a maverick, too deviant in his beliefs even for him.

His options, however, were limited. Cawl was right about that. What else was he going to do?

He thought about Grand Sapient Magos Tessiricon.

‘Very well, archmagos. I am at your service.’

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Chapter Fourteen

MORNTHAR

FLEET TERTIUS GATHERS

VANLESKUS CELEBRATES

Space split with a madman’s wail. Through veils of shifting light, Battle Group Jovian exited the warp. Two dozen warships of various classes, and all their attendant support, trailing misty horrors in their wake.

They emerged slowly, flickering like poor quality vid captured on ancient chemical film. The boiling interface between reality and unreality mercifully hid the hellscape behind. It clung tenaciously to the ships, reluctant to let them go, then realspace drives ignited one by one, showing fire and defiance to the insanity behind the vessels, and they pushed themselves from the sea of souls back up the beach of reality. Warp rifts closed. The ships had arrived into the Mornthar System.

‘Translation concluded.’

The call went up through every ship.

‘Translation concluded.’

The crews sat out the trembling of their vessels with apprehension. Disaster could strike at any time, but translation was particularly dangerous, especially with the storms raging in the warp.

Upon the command deck of the *Faith's Anvil*, the lord lieutenant waited. Messinius was in his armour again, and though he did not wear his helm or gauntlets, they, along with his weapons, were within easy reach. The shaking subsided. The painful growl of straining warp tech faded away. The ship's voice changed, the unearthly harmonics of the Geller fields replaced by the calmer hum of the main engine stacks burning, and the tolling of bells and plainsong of the priests informed all that they had left the warp safely behind.

The Master Psykanum gave Messinius a nod from his control pit.

'Open the oculus,' Messinius commanded. The ship's captain, Yuulk, remained silent upon his throne, content to occupy himself with communicating with the *Faith's Anvil*'s command sections, leaving the bridge to the Space Marine.

With a ponderous, mechanical grumble the shutters rolled back into their housing. The oculus of the ship was a wide, curving sweep of armaglass all of a piece. Messinius wondered where and when the vessel had originally been constructed, because the knowledge to make windows of that size and quality was all but lost. It was one reason he had chosen the *Faith's Anvil* as his flagship. Without the usual cluttering of mullions and transoms, the view into the void was unparalleled.

There were other ships en route to the muster ahead of them, three groups in direct view of the oculus, their main drives smoky yellow against the velvet of infinity. He saw them very clearly, and he realised that it would be a pleasure to oversee a void engagement from this deck. It was sobering, he thought, how something as simple as an unobstructed window could have such an effect. A little change to the usual habits of the world around him that he would not have thought of had it not presented itself to him, but on seeing it, knew it immediately to be superior. A deeper apprehension of other simple things that had been lost by mankind moved beneath the current of his thoughts, and brought with it a kind of melancholy he cared little for.

'Give me a broad-spectrum augur scan, maximal soak within engagement distance, full-system augury to follow.'

'Yes, lord lieutenant,' the Master Augurum responded.

'And ignite the hololith. Superior ecliptic view.'

The main strategic hololith burst into life, showing the system from above. Three gas giants crowded together at the edge, an unfriendly orange sun at the centre, a runt of a dwarf world lost in the inner orbits and precious little else. Mornthar was a nowhere place, a dot of light on the astrogation charts. It was nominally part of the Imperium; there was a way station to cement the claim, but it was small, five hundred souls, no more than a sentry posted on the edge of the wilderness. The system had been off the main routes before the Rift, and had stayed that way. Mornthar was notable for nothing before the battle that had recently occurred there. Most of the billions upon billions of worlds strewn across the galaxy held little interest to Terra. Mornthar was one missed supply shipment from being such a system, but despite its unimportance, it would forever be known as the place where two hosts of the Word Bearers Traitor Legion had been run to ground and destroyed.

Icons denoting key features of the systems blinked into being. All elements were tentative and stylised. To begin with, the chart was a simple map, flat and representational, the elements sketched in; as far from a true-pict as a primitive's charcoal beast on a cave wall is from its model. As augury command got to work, sending their orders up to the strange and isolated stations of the main sensor arrays, that began to change. First of all, known system data dragged from data-looms flickered into place, adjusting positions and appending features with additional information. Close objects like the near ships were first to solidify, along with established features, such as the way station, navigational hazards, and the Fleet Tertius muster point. Orbital paths of the worlds stitched themselves in dotted curves of red. The sun was a simple circle, appended with stellar data.

The close-range auspexes had painted in the detail around the *Faith's Anvil* in full within five minutes, the hololith changing colour as information poured in, replacing the icons with fuller graphical representations. The long-range scans would take hours to complete fully, but after a few additional minutes the fringes of the close-range field were already filling out, reaching deeper into the system. In this way the spread of gas giants came to life, shepherding a flock of moons. The fleet's destination was the dwarf world, and by that a skull bracketed by wings changed into a small true-pict of the way station. The red dots of its orbital track corrected themselves, and the model world began to move around the model sun.

Elsewhere on the light-spun cartolith, signs of conflict began to assert themselves. Purple blotches seeped across the display where unusual radiations lingered. Debris fields were blocked in, analysed, detailed. Dead hulks made their way wildly across space, searching for stable orbits like maddened hounds after a scent. Messinius read the progress of the battle in these traces. Whoever had pulled off this victory had been skilled at ambush. He saw signs of swift intercepts, a winnowing of forces, a final, devastating interdiction. It looked like the enemy had been making for the star, to slingshot themselves around it and away from pursuit. They had been running, that was something in itself, but not only had they been forced to flee, they had been caught in flight and annihilated. The Traitor Legions were difficult opponents. More details in textual format scrolled down the side of the cartolith. From these, he could calculate the number of vessels destroyed and their void displacement.

Whoever had done this, he decided, was touched by genius.

There were pulses plotted on the map. The temporal-metaphysical data points of warp ingress. More ships were arriving, and they kept on coming.

On the route to the muster point, the victory was commemorated. The wreck of the enemy flagship had been placed directly in the most favourable path between the principal Mandeville point and the muster.

A battleship. Five and a half miles of crumpled structure floating dead in the void. A lone frigate waited near its side, standing guard, as if at any moment it might reawaken and loose its fury upon mankind again. This was a fanciful thought. More likely the frigate was there to prevent the ship being looted. There were acquisitive members of the Adeptus Mechanicus in every battle group. Not all of them obeyed the primarch’s diktat that ended the age-old practice of refurbishing traitor ships.

The ship was a prize to make any magos forget his oaths. Arrow-headed, strong, sleeker and less clumsy than more modern counterparts, it was a vessel built in a better age, and no doubt full of lost technologies. Also full of corruption, Messinius thought as they sailed past. Its buttresses were topped with statues of leering Neverborn scores of yards high. An unpleasant glow still shone from some of its windows, though the reactor was out and no power sources showed on the *Faith’s Anvil*’s sensors. Even across twenty miles of space, Messinius felt a low malice, and he was certain it was not his imagination.

Shortly after that, the muster point icon was caught up in the spreading of augury detail. The swarm of dots and numbers denoting the fleet turned into wireframe models. There was now so much information coursing through the ship's noosphere he could have called for more detailed images yet, if he had wished.

There were hundreds of ships already anchored around the dwarf world. Dislodged from its place at the brink of the interstellar dark by the three gas giants, the world had been deflected alone into the central portion of the system. There had probably been other rocky worlds there. They had almost certainly been evicted by the same forces that had pushed the dwarf into the inner orbits. One day, it too would be flung out, but for now it served well as a way marker for the gathering. Ship idents and signums blinked on as information broadcast by their vox-networks was received. Orders, also travelling at the sluggish pace of light, arrived next. Battle Group Jovian had been noticed. The void acquired more itinerant stars, as more ships moved to the rendezvous.

Coordinates directed them to their allotted anchorage. The captain and crew went about the business of plotting collision avoidance in the crowded environment. Messinius watched. The muster was a bright, ragged star. It would be several hours until individual ships resolved from it. He lapsed into thought, considering what the purpose of the muster was. Not even the first actions of the Indomitus Crusade had seen so many assets in one place, not even the battle of Machorta Sound, or the taking of the principal warp nexuses in the Segmentum Solar. Even for those crucial first moves, the fleets had split to tackle multiple objectives – too large to be useful, and a waste of resources. That left him with a few possibilities. It could be one of reorganisation. Fleetmistress VanLeskus was a stickler for detail, he wouldn't put it past her to reassign her forces if she believed it would improve their efficiency, thus winning her more glory. Another, perhaps connected to the first, was a reorientation of Fleet Tertius efforts, a gathering before a new split. The battle groups had become practically independent. Maybe she wished to reassert her control. A third option was a coordinated attack across a broad front. This final possibility itself had a few options. There could be a drive to purge the Segmentum Solar completely of the Word Bearers who had caused such problems these last years, but he doubted that would be the case. The Word Bearers were

already melting away from the segmentum, so it probably wasn't that. There was the endless problem of the orks on the borders of Segmenta Solar, Ultima and Obscurus, and Fleet Secundus always required reinforcement. He could imagine a drive north for that, but a whole battle group? It was too much to hold the line, not enough to take the fight to the traitors within the Eye of Terror. The Nachmund Gauntlet, perhaps? A voyage into Nihilus? There were rumours of a new crossing over the Rift.

Someone approached.

'Lord lieutenant?'

Messinius did not turn to face the speaker, but continued to survey the void. 'Yes?'

The man stepped round in front of him. He was an ensign, his uniform bearing a vox-officer's pips. In a shaking hand he held out a thin piece of paper. The end wavered as if it were caught in a breeze, he was trembling so much. His face was damp with sweat. Transhuman dread had him in its grip. Some baseline humans hid their fear well. This one did not.

'A personal message for you, my lord. From the Fleetmistress Lady VanLeskus.'

Messinius reached out and took the paper. The man bowed his head and made a quick retreat. He read it in a glance. It was unnecessarily long, florid, full of VanLeskus' talent to praise and demean in the same phrase.

He crumpled the paper in his hand.

Of course there would be a reception. Cassandra VanLeskus was a woman of an old and refined family, who had married into an even older and more refined family. Habits died hard, and aristocratic habits died hardest of all. VanLeskus positively revelled in the exclusive, hierarchical dance of high society, whether she was at war or not. She probably treated such things as just another military operation, he thought.

He had no desire to attend. He found no value in small talk and pageantry.

The captain caught Messinius' somewhat grim demeanour.

'Bad news, my lord?'

'It depends on your definition of bad news,' said Messinius heavily. 'VanLeskus is throwing a banquet.'

'I see,' said the captain neutrally. He had once made his opinions of VanLeskus known to Messinius. They were brief: that as a commander she was exemplary, as a human being, not so much. 'Good luck.'

‘Sound as disinterested as you like, Shipmaster Yuulk,’ Messinius said. ‘You’ll be attending too. Everyone of the equivalent rank of captain and above is commanded to be there.’

A flurry of activity followed. Multiple hails and officials to be spoken to. Messinius dealt personally with the most exalted, applied a little influence to ensure fresh water and food were supplied to his group, then left the rest to Shipmaster Yuulk.

A few hours later, Messinius found himself upon the command deck of Fleet Tertius’ flagship, *Precept Magnificat.* What he saw lived up in every way to what he had expected. An Oberon-class battleship possessed a great majesty already. It was not enough for VanLeskus, and the command deck of the *Precept Magnificat* had been transformed into a propagandist’s vision of Imperial might.

A fleet is a city, Messinius thought, taking in the profligacy on display. *Most of its citizens suffer privation, while the upper classes indulge in frivolity.*

There were sculptures of ice that dripped cold water into rare liquors. There were sculptures of steel. Sculptures of magnetically manipulated plasma held in buzzing flasks that changed to the music. The music came from a hundred-piece orchestra, whose stage had been erected for this one night alone in the place of a servitor choir. Moving that many hard-wired servitors was no small task, but it had been done. The level of excess confounded the Space Marine, though he understood the role of spectacle in statecraft. The stage was plated with gold. Cyber-constructs and vat creatures swept overhead in clouds of perfumed smoke singing songs extolling the prowess of the VanLeskus and Markha-Gher families. Troupes of extravagantly costumed mimes formed living tableaux of the lady’s victories, before bursting apart, running around in a manner Messinius assumed to be artistic but which he found merely irritating, and forming themselves once more. Like the tableaux, the sculptures were all of VanLeskus.

She does not lack ego, thought Messinius.

Messinius attended both as lord lieutenant of Fleet Tertius entire, and as acting groupmaster of Battle Group Jovian. Among the several hundred high-ranking officers ranged around the command deck there were representatives from many Imperial adepta and military organisations,

including a score or more other Adeptus Astartes, most of whom looked either uncomfortable or bored by the event. He exchanged words with one or two of them. Most he knew. Otherwise, he hung back, watching little power plays unfold. False flattery, calculated slights, the display of ego, wealth and power. On and on it went. Messinius' Chapter made it their mission to help govern the worlds around their own. He saw all this for the pantomime it was. Such effort they put into display and courting favour, and their attempts grew wilder when VanLeskus herself put in an appearance.

It started with a ripple of applause near a minor entrance to the deck – the *Precept Magnificat* was so large the bridge had several. The applause spread. The commanders of the fleet abandoned their fractured ambitions for a moment, and turned as one, united for a few brief minutes in approbation for their leader.

VanLeskus stepped up onto a grav-platform as soon as she entered the room, the better that she might be seen. She was wearing a ridiculously complicated uniform. The top was a tight military tunic covered in frogging and braid. The collar was so high it embraced her head and overtopped it by a foot, though her hair was higher still, a grand noblewoman's wig of multiple layers ringed with chains of diamonds. The tails of her tunic were twenty feet long, held above and behind her by a matched quartet of cyber-cherubim, their slack vat-made faces covered over with delicate porcelain masks. The left side of her chest was covered in medals. Two pages walked either side of her carrying boards with yet more medals upon them. Her trousers, made of yards and yards of cloth, ballooned extravagantly over tight black riding boots whose fronts came over her knee and which were polished to a brilliant, mirror shine.

As the platform rose into the air, hands clapped, feet stamped. Cheers issued from every throat, and it was as if the sound of the applause itself was bearing her up.

She smiled slyly. She was loving every moment of it. Her face creased with joy, bunching only slightly around her sapphire augmetic eye. She crossed her arms over her chest in a stiff aquila salute, then bowed, and the applause filled the command deck, wall to wall, floor to ceiling. Messinius felt himself drowning in that noise; he had endured battles that were not so loud. The musicians evidently felt the same, for they ceased their efforts.

The grav-platform sank down, vanishing into the crowd. The applause reached its climax, then petered out. Conversation recommenced, filling the room with its secretive murmur, and the noble commanders of Fleet Tertius turned back to their own circles, heads near in conspiracy with friends, backs turned on their rivals.

Except on the far side of the deck, where there was a disturbance in the crowd, like a current in water. People were bunching up, creating an obvious density which followed VanLeskus around. By this and the hovering train of her dress, Messinius tracked her movements.

The music began again.

He spoke briefly with the second captain of the Argent Swords Chapter, who had served briefly under Messinius' direct command. He recognised Baron Baduin Alarbus Selwyn of House Krast, though they had never met, and congratulated him on his actions at Mundus Di Venn. The man had slain a corrupt Warhound Titan, he had heard, a phenomenal feat of arms. Baduin took Messinius' praise quietly, insisting that he had only landed the final blow. He was an old man, imperturbable-looking, but reserved in manner. It might have been because his entire lance had perished in the action, but Messinius wondered if he had been told that Messinius' servant shared a similar surname. It was the sort of thing that would offend a scion of a Knightly house, and the sort of thing that someone might have said to him precisely because of that. *A small barb, leveraged for some minor advantage, and so we all burn in the fires of solipsism,* Messinius thought. He bid the baron farewell.

He drank a little wine. He watched the bustle of VanLeskus' progress, until like the wake that precedes the surfacing of an ocean leviathan, it drew near, and she burst through her sycophants to stand before him.

'Captain Messinius!' she said, with a pleasantness that managed to be both sincere and feigned at once. She never used his other title of lord lieutenant. *It cannot be easy to be her,* thought Messinius. He knew she respected him, perhaps liked him. He respected her skill at arms, if not her ego. But he did not understand her envy of him. It was ridiculous. He was an Angel of Death, a weapon in the Emperor's armoury. Her achievements were more remarkable than his by any objective measure. She had no gifts. She worked in a more complex world, as he saw it. His efforts furthered her plans. Still, she was envious of him because of what he was, something she

could never be. Envy was her only real flaw, he believed. She could not abide to be overshadowed by others, for any reason. She had to be the most lauded person.

Both ambition and envy would explain why she had chosen her husband. Darvian VanLeskus would overshadow nobody, unless the metric was wealth, and that wealth was now effectively his wife's. Messinius saw him, skulking about at the edge of the bustle, a nervous, short man in poor physical shape, strands of hair plastered down with wax over an inbred, bulging cranium, equally bulging eyes darting about beneath an unfortunately heavy brow. He had the look of the sort of highborn who had spent an indolent life taking from the Imperium without giving back, until he had blundered into a place he had never expected to be, and could not escape. *Well*, Messinius thought, *he is doing his service to the Emperor now.*

'Lady VanLeskus,' he said. 'Lord VanLeskus.' He dipped his head slightly. Lady VanLeskus was already very tall. That evening the top of her elaborately dressed hair reached up to his forehead.

She made a show of noble's kisses, as was the custom on some worlds, planting them on the air either side of his cheeks, although they ended up on either side of his chin, thanks to the height difference. She did so with exaggerated daintiness at odds with her position and her sheer physicality, which he found bizarre. She was a powerfully built, square-shouldered woman, and she looked ridiculous in her uniform. Maybe that was her intention, to say, *I can do what I like. I am invulnerable and infallible*. She'd always been a little that way, ever since they'd first met. Success had made her more so. It was a dangerous state of mind.

'I hope you enjoy this banquet, my lord,' she said. 'Darvian said I should hold a triumph instead, but honestly, what manner of leader holds a triumph before victory?'

Lord VanLeskus shrank back a little.

Messinius must have been frowning. She made an exaggerated, enquiring expression.

'Do you disapprove of all this, Captain Messinius? Do you think equality should be spread among the lower castes like the Emperor's light?'

There were dutiful titters at her joke, a chorus that was trying too hard.

'No,' he said. 'Concentration of economic resources in the hands of an elite and the subjugation of the masses is an effective system of governance.

In this situation, what could be gained by dividing up all you have here among the millions of crew in the fleet? Each would gain a crumb, and what would be the utility in that? By concentrating these luxuries here, and providing your officers with them, you ensure their loyalty, display your largesse, and increase morale. They may forget the war for a night, or at least feel rewarded for their sacrifices, even if those who serve them are not rewarded. It is a fallacy to suggest that simply because they have the power, that they do not suffer in their own way. Even if their suffering is lesser, their responsibility is greater, and their subjective appreciation of their life different. A gunner in the lower decks may wish to survive. That is his goal. A shipmaster seeks honour for their family and a record of their deeds for posterity. Both feel anguish if those goals are challenged. So no, I do not disapprove. You run your affairs in the way you see fit. They are successful. That is all that matters in war.'

VanLeskus laughed, a falsely delicate laugh for such a loud, large woman.

'Do you see, gentlemen? An angel of the Emperor speaks, and condones our party. Where does that leave your sense of social justice, Sjenavour?' She picked out a man Messinius did not know and had never heard of. He assumed he and VanLeskus had disputed her largesse. Sjenavour looked hunted with all eyes upon him. Something in that look moved Messinius to speak again.

'You are mistaken,' Messinius said. 'I do not disapprove, but I did not say I condone it. There are more factors at play in good governance than rewarding the upper echelons. Morality is one. The Emperor spreads His light to all, because all people are important to Him. This affair here is useful, but if I were in command, I would have chosen another way. Often, restraint is a better method of forging loyalty, respect, and good morale.'

VanLeskus' face went instantly hard, as dark and unyielding as the epochal ice of a comet. Her sycophants were aghast. A few braver officers smirked.

'Then let us be glad that you are not in command. The fate of Sabatine tells us how effective the White Consuls' idealism is. Or should I say, *was*.' She raised her eyebrows, a quick, aggressive movement. They dropped just as fast, narrowing her eyes. Her augmetic glinted. She smiled poisonously. 'Good evening, captain.'

She swept away, her hangers-on around her like flies on a grox. Sjenavour raised his glass in a secret salute. Messinius stared at him until he looked

down. Seeing no reciprocity of feeling in the Space Marine, Sjenavour stalked off, face glowing with embarrassment.

A low chuckle sounded behind Messinius at the level of his elbow. It carried the scent of Necromundan rum, and a familiar contempt.

‘I see you’re giving VanLeskus a dose of the Emperor’s own truth, Vitrian.’

Messinius looked down onto a brittle, vicious smile.

‘I am very glad of that, you see, because I absolutely, totally, unreservedly cannot stand that bitch.’

‘Groupmistress Athagey,’ Messinius said.

Eloise Athagey raised her glass at him. ‘The very same.’

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Chapter Fifteen

AN UNUSUAL INFLUENCE

THE GOAL OF FLEET TERTIUS

GUILLIMAN'S MESSAGE

Athagey was drunk, that much was certain. Her words were losing the bright swiftness of early intoxication, dissolving into what must have been her fourth or fifth drink. But she was not slurring, not yet.

'Come this way,' she said, seizing Messinius' arm and working her hand into the crook of his elbow. She managed after a moment of squirming. Her fingers were tiny sticks wedged between the slabs of his muscle. He raised his eyebrows at her familiarity, but she was far too intoxicated to notice. 'Come this way and drink with me, captain. Let's catch up, for old times' sake.' She swirled her rum about. Ice cubes clinked on the sides of a perfect crystal glass. The ice was pure water, filtered the Emperor alone knew how many times, and dispensed carelessly while the lower orders subsisted on rations of brackish recyc.

Across the room, VanLeskus moved on through the crowd, a battleship forcing aside its escorts. Away from her immense gravitational pull, people clustered in tighter groups of conversation. Through a gap in the conspiracies, he spied Finnula Diomed skulking behind a stanchion at the

edge of the grand oculus. Athagey turned towards her, surely as a compass needle is dragged round to the north.

She pulled. He resisted. ‘Come on, Vitrian!’ she insisted, tugging at his arm. Her hand was weak on Messinius’ arm, but his resistance was token. If he had chosen so, she would never have moved him at all.

Few mortals could sway Messinius to their will. Eloise Athagey was one of them. Anyone else pestering him to come hide in a corner, drink, and thumb their nose at authority would have run into a metaphorical wall, and would have left soon after, sweating under Messinius’ disapproving stare, secretly thanking the Emperor they were still alive. Athagey was not frightened of him. She found him a challenge. It made her tiresomely insistent. Messinius gave in to her because it was easier than declining. Besides, he admitted to himself, he liked her. She was refreshing. A bit of controlled chaos in a life of order sharpened your wits.

He shouldn’t like her: she was foolhardy, often intoxicated, arrogant, a little vain, insecure, but she was brilliant, and had a certain reckless panache for war that reminded him of his younger self. Chaplain Kandred had told him time and again during his time as a neophyte that patience was a weapon, a lesson he had never fully taken to heart, though that would have surprised the men and women who now knew him. To others, he seemed thoughtful, almost too patient, but that was a result of an overcorrection of behaviour, not an innate quality. He was renowned as a calm unpicker of webs. The reality was his soul screamed for action. He had an illogical feeling that Athagey recognised it in him.

He wondered if Chaplain Kandred lived, if Longinus, Atemanis, Xydias, Landion or any of them did. Sabatine had fallen a decade ago.

‘Are you listening to me?’ Athagey turned about and poked him in the chest. ‘Up there, I say, lord lieutenant, do you hear me?’

He looked down at her, as impassively as he had looked down on the doomed Lord of Antopie.

‘I am listening.’

‘Don’t listen. Just come! Come on!’

Messinius gently removed her hand. ‘I will come.’

Athagey set off. Messinius followed. The crowd shrank back from his inhuman bulk. The braver officers saluted him with their glasses.

‘Damn it, Vitrian, you’re stealing all my attention!’ hissed Athagey, only half-joking. They reached the far side of the room, where Athagey’s adjutant lurked. ‘Go on then, Finnula! Don’t be shy. Say hello to the lord lieutenant. You recognise him, yes? I don’t see how you possibly couldn’t, great big lump of gene-enhanced meat.’ She gave him a comradely thump. Their height difference meant it hit him in the forearm. To him, it was a gentle caress. ‘Ow!’ she said, shaking out her fingers. ‘Like punching rock.’

Athagey suddenly downed her drink, and snagged two more from the tray of a server passing them. ‘Fetch me more rum!’ she shouted after him. Her mouth formed a surprised, pleased round. She had seen someone she knew.

‘Hang on here, captain, I shall return in a moment!’

She was off, leaving Messinius towering over Diomed.

‘Finnula. It is a pleasure to see you again,’ said Messinius.

Finnula Diomed hung back, her worry obvious to anyone that cared to look, and if Athagey went on as she was, they would soon be looking.

‘Lord lieutenant,’ she said. ‘What a relief. A sensible man.’ She smiled, a little primly. Diomed had never been a joyous person, but her smile was weaker than he remembered, more forced perhaps, and she was wan. She looked significantly older than she had last time Messinius had seen her. ‘How have you been?’

‘I serve He who sits upon the Golden Throne of Terra, and I hope that I have done so well,’ he said, and bowed his head.

Her smile became a little more relaxed. ‘You haven’t changed a bit then. Still serious.’

‘I am a Space Marine, we are not known for our love of frivolity,’ he said, but he smiled, and she smiled back. ‘And how do you fare?’

She shrugged. ‘You know, the usual. Smiting foes. Keeping an eye on her.’ She nodded at her captain. ‘I’m sure you can work out for yourself which I find the most draining.’

‘Finnula!’ Athagey shouted across the throng. ‘I hope you aren’t being boring.’ She turned to wave one of her drinks behind her at someone they could not see. ‘This way! This way! Come on! This man is not only an Angel of Death, he has the ear of the lord regent himself! Don’t keep him waiting.’

Messinius raised his eyebrows at Diomed. She shrugged. Neither of them knew to whom Athagey might be speaking.

If war had eroded Diomed, then at first glance Athagey appeared invigorated by it. She was vivaciously drunk. Laughter trailed her through the crowd of officers as she sauntered back, firing off wit like point-defence fire behind her. Which, Messinius supposed, it sort of was.

‘Messinius!’ she said. ‘Where were we?’

‘Diomed and I were getting–’

‘Drunk, I hope!’ she shouted. ‘Here, this should help with that. Come on! Come on!’ she called behind her, waving her hand furiously.

A pair of menials were pushing a cart draped with white cloth towards them. Upon it was a barrel. Next to the barrel was a huge goblet.

‘I was going to say reacquainted,’ said Messinius.

‘This is for you, my stern friend.’ Athagey rang the goblet with the base of her glass. ‘I remembered how inadequate those glasses back on Suladen seemed in your hand. I had you drinking out of a vase. Do you recall?’

‘I recall everything.’

‘Was that a spot of levity?’ she said, then grinned. ‘A vase!’ she cackled. ‘This is better. No, no!’ she said to the menials. ‘Not there! Bring it here, for the Emperor’s sake.’

They pushed the cart before the Space Marine, cowering from him when he looked upon them. Unlike Athagey, they certainly suffered transhuman dread. Athagey shooed them away, and in the waft of air the gesture produced, Messinius caught the tang of stimulants on her breath and sweat. Not just alcohol then. Sensing Messinius’ disapproval, Diomed bobbed out into the crowd and tried without much success to pull Athagey back into the shadows with her. Athagey scowled and shook free her hand.

‘Let me be! Seriously, Finnula. You need to loosen up. I’m not as drunk as I seem, alright?’

‘But…’

‘Alright?’ she repeated more forcefully. She smoothed down her sleeve. ‘If I want to make a spectacle of myself, then I will, clear, lieutenant?’

‘As the open void, captain,’ Diomed said.

Diomed backed off. Messinius looked from one woman to the other.

‘Is everything alright?’ he said.

‘It’s fine. Take a drink with me. Stop looking so po-faced. Unburden yourself.’

Messinius sighed. He uncorked the barrel at the top, tipped the spigot end over his goblet, and let it flow. Thick, spiced spirits poured out in a silken stream.

‘You have got to stop trying to get me drunk,’ he said. ‘It will never work.’ He set the barrel down.

‘We’ll see. That’s the strongest stuff they had.’ She dropped her voice to an unconvincing whisper. ‘VanLeskus has a surprisingly diverse cellar. Go on then! Drink!’

Messinius raised his goblet. ‘Under His light.’

‘Whatever,’ said Athagey, and drained her glass.

Messinius’ drink was strong enough for him to feel the burn as it slipped down his gullet. For a second, he felt a brief lightening of spirits, before his Emperor’s gifts purged the poison from his system.

‘Well?’ said Athagey.

Messinius shook his head.

‘Emperor damn it! I was sure that would be the one.’

A slow smile crept over his face. ‘If I am to be truthful, there was a moment…’

Athagey’s face became expectant.

‘It really only was a moment.’

‘You will have to see if you can find some Fenrisian *mjød*,’ said Diomed. She was trying to join in. It was not convincing. ‘I hear that is the only way to intoxicate a Space Marine.’

‘It’s not the only way,’ said Messinius.

‘Oh no?’ said Athagey.

‘Do you really think I would inform you of the others? You are obsessed with intoxicating me. Really, you should have more dignity.’

Athagey took another gulp of rum, and held it in her mouth a moment before swallowing. ‘Now I know you are mocking me. If you won’t loosen up, will you at least tell me how your crusade has been?’

‘I have travelled,’ Messinius said. ‘I go where I am needed. My role helping the Primaris assimilate has grown less important as the Unnumbered Sons dwindle. Most have been assigned to their ultimate postings. As a result, I return to waging war more of late.’

‘And? How does it make you feel? Come on! Speak honestly. You are among friends here.’ She smirked. Diomed rolled her eyes. ‘Tell us how

you *feel*,’ she said, poking him in the stomach with a forefinger.

‘I find the lessening of my bureaucratic duties liberating.’

‘That’s it? Less paperwork? What about the victories you have won?’

‘Satisfying. Service performed well is the greatest nourishment for the soul.’

‘Pfft! Modesty. You are acting commander of Battle Fleet Jovian now, yes?’

‘Yes.’

‘That’s a fine rank.’

‘I do as the Emperor, the primarch and humanity demand of me, nothing more.’

‘For Throne’s sake!’ Athagey said. ‘Where’s your sense of joy?’

‘I do not have one,’ said Messinius honestly.

‘You chose the Mars-class cruiser *Faith’*s *Anvil* as the group’s temporary command ship?’

‘Yes. Hest’s vessel was the only true battleship in our group. A Mars-class is an adequate replacement.’

‘Why not one of the Space Marine cruisers in Jovian?’

He gave her a slightly exasperated look. ‘You know why, Eloise,’ he said. ‘Because power cannot be seen to rest solely in the hands of the Adeptus Astartes. The primarch has been very clear about that.’

‘We all know that it’s been you directing the fleet for ages. Hest couldn’t find his own arse with both hands. He had a sinecure post elevated by mistake into one of real command.’

Not by mistake, thought Messinius. *Politics.*

‘You are being unfair. He was competent.’

‘Competence is probably why he’s dead. Competence isn’t enough, and he was not competent.’

‘You are entitled to your opinion. What is the goal of your questioning? You have the mind to see why I act the way I do, and access to reports from my group that state the same.’

‘“What is the goal of your questioning?”’ she mimicked. ‘Emperor’s bones! Do they script this stuff for you? Just indulge me. I prefer to hear news of my friends from my friends. I’m talking to my friend. I hear your last action was putting down a rebellion a few light years away. Now speak,

as a friend, in return. Tell me of your adventures. Was it another incident of apostasy?'

'Not this time. The demands of the crusade are too much for some worlds to bear, others call for help from Terra, and in finding neither aid nor guidance, decide to follow their own path. I believe in Antopie's case, it was a little of both.'

She gave him a peculiar look. 'You don't agree they were right, surely?'

'I understood why they did it.'

Athagey looked at him thoughtfully and nodded, reminded of qualities she knew he had but had forgotten. Being Adeptus Astartes created certain assumptions in others that never truly died, no matter how close they became to him.

Athagey turned on her heel. 'How about you, Eloise?' she said, making mock of Messinius' deep tones. She turned back. 'Oh, I've been fine. The usual. Saving the galaxy from the forces of doom.' She spun back again. 'Throne, woman! Give me specifics!' she said, still doing a poor impression of the Space Marine.

Messinius and Diomed shared a glance.

'I am so glad you asked, lord lieutenant. Well, as it happens, instead of chasing glory across the stars, we've been stuck in the Segmentum Solar, running down Word Bearers for years. The unrest in the inner sectors is largely their fault, isn't that right, Finnula?'

'Did you see the battleship?' said Diomed, in an attempt to calm Athagey. She was getting angry.

'It has been purposefully placed so I could not miss it,' said Messinius.

'My work,' said Athagey with hurt pride. 'Mine.' She slapped her chest, making her medals jump. 'Battle Group Iolus smashed them. Caught them in a four-directional trap and obliterated them, heretic bastards. They were falling back from the Solar warzones… I reckon from Talledus, out to spread their dark mischief elsewhere. Now they will not be doing that because they are all dead. You talk about doing your duty, Vitrian. Have I not done mine? Maybe there'll be fewer rebellions now, thanks to me. Maybe, thanks to me, the Emperor can sit a little easier upon His throne. Not that He will ever hear of it.' She looked across the command deck to where VanLeskus was holding court, and her expression went flint-hard. 'Because she's taking all the Throne-damned credit for it.' She drank

abruptly, spilling whatever was in that particular glass down her chin, and wiped it savagely away.

Diomed gave Messinius a pleading look. He thought he understood her need, and attempted to change the subject once more.

‘Do you have any idea why Lady VanLeskus has called the fleet to reassemble?’

The women looked surprised.

‘You do not know?’

‘No. I was given orders to the muster, no more. You do?’ asked Messinius.

‘Yes, well, some of it,’ said Athagey. ‘The orders come from Lord Guilliman himself, so I heard. Hence my surprise. You are closer to him than anyone else I know.’

‘That means little,’ said Messinius.

‘She probably deliberately kept you in the dark. Damn woman’s a glutton for the theatrical.’

Again, Messinius and Diomed shared a look. Athagey was no innocent herself in that regard.

‘As for exactly why,’ Athagey went on, ‘I suppose we are about to find out. Look. She’s getting ready to speak.’

The throng parted magically before VanLeskus. Four banner bearers strutted to her side, carrying the sigil of her natal house, Markha-Gher, the royal flag of her home world Vodine Sergastae, and the elaborate official standard of Fleet Tertius. Least impressive, and trailing last, came the banner of the VanLeskus Industrial Combine. The crowd began to chant, breaking her name down into its three emphatic syllables.

‘Van-Les-kus! Van-Les-kus! Van-Les-kus!’

She nodded approvingly, her smile a study in confected gaiety, heading for another vantage from where she could look down upon the masses; this time a podium with a lectern set up where the ship’s command throne would ordinarily be, the throne having also been removed for the celebration, Messinius noted. The orchestra played her up the stairs, every one of her firm steps placed in time with the music. The music reached a crescendo as she reached the podium, swirled down several complicated scale drops, and ceased the instant she placed her hands upon the spread wings of the golden aquila that made up the lectern.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, gentlemen and ladies, I bid you welcome to this unusual but most welcome reunion of our crusade fleet.’

Someone, somewhere began to applaud, and the noise spread wildly outward from that point, explosive as a shell, rippling through every human being in the room until all were clapping madly. Even the aloof archimandrites and macroteks of the Adeptus Mechanicus, ordinarily immune to such displays, added their chittering binharic approval to the noise.

VanLeskus beamed.

Messinius scrutinised her every gesture. As much as he found Athagey’s attitude towards the fleetmistress troubling from a command point of view, and as ironically similar as the two women were, something of which Athagey was amusingly blind, Messinius shared Athagey’s assessment of VanLeskus to some degree. She was a glory hound, an egotist. The winning of the war did not matter to her. The fate of humanity, perhaps, did not matter. Her glory mattered. She had the assumption the Imperium would prevail, and viewed the crusade as a game of advancement for herself and her line. It was her one true character flaw, and although it did not offend Messinius as much as it did Athagey, he wondered if that flaw might not prove to be fatal.

VanLeskus indulged the applause, and therefore herself, waiting until hands were tired and arms ached, soaking up every last bit of approval before she raised her hands, held them for one last delicious moment of adoration, and dropped them.

The cheers and clapping stopped instantly.

‘My brave officers, honoured representatives of all Imperial adepta, warriors all. We meet again after many victories. The honour roll of Fleet Tertius is long and golden. It is Fleet Tertius that struck the first real blow against the enemy at Machorta. Fleet Tertius that seized the dead world of Olmec and opened the warp conduit there. Fleet Tertius that drove back the opportunistic raids of the Kridi, and halted the depredations of aeldari slavers in the Segmentum Pacificus. It is thanks to our efforts that the Segmentum Solar is once again secure, that the Word Bearers retreat before the ships of the Imperium. Only two weeks ago, we won another great victory here, at Mornthar.’

VanLeskus did not mention Athagey or Battle Group Iolus by name. Messinius could feel Athagey bristling behind him. VanLeskus paused, and flashed a dazzling smile. The cosmetic work on her teeth was peerless, so white they had a hint of luminous blue to match her sapphire eye.

‘There are, of course, other fleets. Other battle groups. Other bold captains and generals, but it is Fleet Tertius which leads the way. Fleet Tertius whose banners are forever at the forefront.’ Her hands gripped the lectern so tightly the knuckles gleamed. ‘Your fleet. My fleet. My victories.’

Another tremendous fusillade of applause thundered across the room.

‘Van-Les-kus! Van-Les-kus!’

She let this run for less time.

‘Now, as to why we are here. Why we have been gathered. You will be proud, I am sure, to learn that the Imperial Regent is pleased with our efforts. Lord Guilliman will not say so out loud. He is polite. He does not wish to offend the other fleetmasters by praising our brilliance.’

Laughter then, teetering on the edge of delirium. The drink flowed. Most of the people in that room had come close to death more than once. Perhaps VanLeskus showed her wisdom, giving them this moment of release.

‘But I know he holds us in the highest regard. Which is why he has chosen Fleet Tertius once more to spearhead efforts in the next great campaign of this war. For years, we have waged war upon the Great Enemy, the fallen Astartes and their evil religion. A new threat has risen to the galactic south. A xenos threat.’

‘The Nephilim Anomaly,’ Messinius murmured to himself. It was obvious, now he thought on it. ‘Guilliman means to take the Nephilim Anomaly.’

‘We shall spend six weeks here, rearming and resupplying. As I speak to you, fresh tenders and Mechanicus repair arks are making their way through the warp. Once our vessels have been blessed and their magazines refilled, we shall be making our way to the Balor System, whence we shall take the fight to the perfidious machine race of the necrons. Let us be bold, and be proud. For if the mighty Traitor Legions cannot stand before us, what chance is there for decrepit alien automata? Enjoy this night. Indulge yourselves. Mark the hours well. I have made every pleasure available to you. Taste them all. Live tonight like highborn nobles. Tomorrow we prepare for a new war.’

Once more the applause began. VanLeskus made the aquila again and bowed, not quite able to hide the satisfaction at the love displayed for her. She turned about with military precision. The orchestra struck up again, but the martial, rousing tune they played was all but lost beneath the soft thunder of hands striking hands, and the endless chanting of the fleetmistress' name.

'I saw you watching me, as we spoke,' VanLeskus said. She had made her way across the room again, stopping this time to speak only with the most important officials and officers. Messinius supposed a standard human might have been flattered, excited even, that she deigned to speak to him twice, even though his status demanded it, being not much lower than hers. But such things did not matter to him. What was advancement to an angel of the Emperor?

'The whole room was watching you,' said Messinius, 'as was appropriate.'

'You don't approve of me, do you, lord lieutenant?' The drunk heat rising off the press of bodies made the command deck oppressive. VanLeskus had acquired a fan from somewhere, and she wafted it at her face. Trickles of sweat ran from her temples, cutting tracks in her powder, like flood waters eroding badlands. 'You play the emotionless Astartes, but I know you understand subtext. It's very boring when I have to explain everything.'

'Then I apologise for inconveniencing you,' Messinius said.

She sighed, a little peevish. 'I'm surprised, really, that you don't like me. A little put out, I might say. You tolerate Groupmistress Athagey there well enough. She has most of my flaws, though perhaps not all of my qualities.'

Athagey's face twisted into an abrupt snarl. Her neck flushed blotchy red. Diomed had to physically restrain her. She leaned in close to her ear. Messinius' enhanced hearing caught her whisper: 'Whatever you are going to say, don't.'

VanLeskus pretended not to notice Athagey's interrupted outburst, but she had. Her grin deepened unpleasantly.

'You are both fine voidsmen,' Messinius said.

'I am pressed for time,' said VanLeskus. 'There are many people here who need to speak to me, and many of them would gain greater pleasure from the experience than you do, I am sure. So to the matter of things. Lord Lieutenant Vitrian Messinius,' she said with a sort of bored formality, 'I

regret to inform you that I shall have to find another master to command your flotilla. You are hereby relieved of command of Battle Group Jovian.'

'How dare she,' hissed Athagey. 'He's four times the commander Hest ever was.'

Messinius bowed. 'As you command. You are fleetmistress. I trust you shall redeploy me somewhere where I might better serve the goals of Fleet Tertius.'

'Oh, don't be so po-faced about it, can't you look angry or seethe secretly a little so I can enjoy it?'

'To what end?' Messinius said. 'It is your right to use my talents as you see fit.'

VanLeskus sighed. 'Because life is boring, and I like vindication. It doesn't matter anyway. I would keep you where you are, for what it's worth. You're a talented commander, even by the high standards of the Adeptus Astartes. I would give you two groups, if I could.'

'Then why am I to leave Jovian?'

'Because, my dear lord Astartes, these are not my orders. They are Roboute Guilliman's. The Imperial Regent has recalled you to his side. The order arrived today.'

She reached behind her. A flunky appeared from nowhere and handed her a sealed scroll. She thrust it at him. When he took it, she smiled.

'Ah, a little reaction there, finally. You are glad to return to your father. So pleasing to see a little pleasure in you. Read the orders at your leisure. Goodbye, Captain Messinius. I doubt you will be returning.' She turned to go, then turned back, slapping her fan decisively into her hand. 'For what it's worth, it's been an honour having you under my command. I shall miss your talents.'

Then she was away in a swirl of silks and sycophants, leaving Messinius thoughtful, and Athagey fuming.

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Chapter Sixteen

SAINTSGIFT

ARGENT SHROUD

THE PRIMARCH'S COMMAND

Shanni Saintsgift raised her laspistol and called out over the thunder of shells.

'Brothers, sisters, faithful of the God-Emperor, we attack now, we attack now! The Emperor protects!'

Placing her life in the hands of her god, she threw herself over the parapet of shattered rockcrete and ran at the enemy line. The ragged skeletons of buildings leaned in with weary interest to see the result of the battle. Explosions roared around her. The bombardment continued, but the shout of the faithful was louder still. They rose up behind their leader, the girl who was touched by divinity, and they followed her willingly into the maelstrom.

Shanni was blessed. Not one bullet touched her. Shrapnel buzzed past her, close enough to taste hot metal. None cut her. Fire erupted beside her, to the front, and to the rear. Flame enveloped her. She did not burn. Others were not so fortunate. Men and women fell in droves, in ecstasies, praise of the Emperor upon their mangled lips. Living bodies were turned into bloody tangles of bones. Bullets ripped organs from their seats. Las-light flashed

black holes through muscle. By the end of her charge, Shanni was drenched in blood. None of it was hers. Gobbets of the faithful were stuck in her hair. She herself was without harm, as her followers expected. They relied upon her blessings. As long as she was at their head, they could not fail, the priests said. The golden guardians of the Emperor Himself had saved her on Gathalamor. His eye was upon her. His hand shielded her. Her sole infirmity after a decade of war was a slight limp from the day she was saved, a leg broken when the lords of Terra had emerged from a miraculous golden mist and saved her body and soul. It was the Emperor's mark.

When the mob of the faithful reached the enemy's ranks they were much reduced, and yet they hit hard, a tidal wave of fury and belief. The death that chased them across the broken city gave them impetus. The foe saw feeble men and women, and it was true that individually they were easily slain, but they were not just men and women. They were the instruments of their god. United by their love of the Emperor, they were unstoppable.

Shanni ran at a deserter still clad in a filthy Astra Militarum uniform. Straggles of thread marked where he had ripped free his badges and with them, his loyalty. In their place he wore the branded mark of the dark ones on his forehead. She hated him – hated him with a purity that she would not have been able to describe had she been asked to do so. He snarled rotten teeth at her. She dipped her shoulder the instant before contact, lifted it hard as she hit, driving into his solar plexus. He collapsed with a half-musical wheeze. He seemed shocked that a girl so short and starved as Shanni could have the strength to knock him down, shock that grew to horrified realisation as her notched sword stabbed down into his throat. He tried to speak, to hurl a final curse or beg forgiveness. It mattered not to her. It came out as a welter of blood.

She yanked her sword free of the gristle and brandished its bloodied tip.

'Kill them!' she screamed. 'Kill them all! For the most holy Emperor!'

'For the Emperor! For Terra!' her followers screamed, and they poured past her in a flood. They had few real weapons. Most of them carried improvised bludgeons. The little gunfire they gave out was quickly lost in the sound of screams, and the wet crunch of heavy objects hitting flesh.

Their foes were mortal, just like the faithful, and like the faithful they fought in a huge, ill-disciplined formation. They too waved icons of their devotion, but they followed different gods now. The marks of their unclean

deities were stamped into their flesh by devilish wills. Bodies were twisted into new and hideous shapes. Mottled skin, fangs, horns, extra limbs, eyes on stalks, scales, feathers, writhing tentacles in place of mouths, all manner of vileness. Among them were full-blooded beast kin, mutants from birth, and yet such was the power of the great Dark Gods in twisting flesh that the most corrupt of the cultists were impossible to tell apart from the abhumans.

Neither sort were innocent. The cultists had made their choice. The abhumans were born that way, true, but they could have ended themselves for the glory of Terra. They all existed on the same continuum of filth. Shanni had no mercy for any of them. She fired her lasgun until its worn power pack grew scalding hot, and it sputtered a feeble, harmless ray of blue that only dazzled the last creature she aimed at. No matter. The woman blinked her three, crusted eyes in pain, giving Shanni ample time to bring her sword down on her collarbone, breaking it, and she fell with a cry. A second blow sliced open the hateful face, then the mutant disappeared under trampling feet.

‘For the Emperor!’ She screamed her hymns, there was no music in her song. Her eyes were wild with bloodlust. Spittle flew from her mouth with every word of praise, each progressively more savage, until they were strangled, animal grunts little different to the bleats and thick-tongued screeches the abhumans made.

The sky screamed. Fire rained down. The creatures that drove this army of the lost at the Imperial lines shelled the battlefield, not caring that their bombs slew as many of their own ragged horde as they did the faithful. They were wicked angels, false prophets that dripped honeyed lies of freedom into the ears of the weak, and turned them from the light. This real enemy were somewhere ahead of them. The horde was an annoyance keeping Shanni back from her true foe. If the abhumans were abhorrent by birth, the cultists by choice, the Traitor Astartes were a hundred times worse. They had been given the gifts of the Emperor. They had been exalted above other men, they had known the love of the Lord of Mankind, and they had spat upon their oaths, and laughed.

‘Kill them!’ she screamed. ‘Kill them all!’

The cultists were wavering before the faithful’s counter-attack, shocked by its ferocity. They were falling. They had more guns, better blades, but they

counted for little in the face of true faith. They fell before the Emperor's wrath. Their weapons were snatched up by the faithful.

There was fight in some of them still. A huge beastman came hurtling by her, head lowered, snorting mists of blood. It was wounded, and all the more dangerous for its pain. In its fear and bloodlust it had forgotten the tiny human part of itself, abandoning hands and tools, using the animal gifts of its horns to slay. A man stepped forward to shoot it down, only to catch its horns in his stomach. The beastman tossed its head, ripping out the horns along with the man's guts. The man toppled off to the side. The abhuman roared, a mix of bleat and human shout, full of despair and savagery.

Shanni whirled around, her gore-soaked hair slapping against her face. The beastman was a minor threat, but one that could become graver. The cultists were following the path of slaughter, and rediscovering their nerve.

'Bring it down!'

Once these people had been serfs, drudges, menials. They were frightened and downtrodden, before they had truly seen the light. Now they were heroes, one and all. They stepped forward, eager to give their lives for His glory. A bludgeon whistled at the abhuman, hitting with a dull thwack. The creature slavered foam, wild-eyed. It backhanded the man, sending him crashing back into others coming up behind him. To deliver the blow, the half-man twisted, exposing its ribs to a thrust from a sharpened iron paling torn from a fence. It chopped down, grabbing the shaft, and there followed a brief, savage tug of war with the wielder – a woman with a shaved head and crude tattoos of her enthroned god spidering up her scalp. Crying with pain, the beastman charged towards the woman holding the spear, carrying her off her feet and down. The beastman tore out the spike, even as it stamped the woman dead with its hooves. Another martyr. Another glorious death! Shanni's followers threw themselves at the thing, dragging at its massively muscled arms, jabbing at it with their handmade knives, even biting it. It howled and threw them off. More fell, paying with their lives, but the circle tightened around the beast. There were priests among Shanni's band, and one of them appeared there, waving his holy book and chainsword at the mutant, exhorting the faithful to higher violence. Hatred shone in every eye. Blows rained down. The creature sought to break free, but could not. Wounds opened on every part of its grey-furred hide. The priest came forward, bellowing his litany. The beast shoved him back.

Shanni smashed a man in the face with her spent pistol, breaking his nose. Whether you professed loyalty to great supernatural powers or not, a broken nose would make you fall down. She turned away from the man as two young women fell on him, raining blows on him with lumps of stone. The beast lived. Other cultists were moving through the rain of fire and explosives to its aid. This thing was special to them, then, a totem. It had to die, and soon.

'Move aside!' she yelled. She grabbed one of her mob by the collar of his filthy shirt and hauled him out of the way. Her sword nicked his ear in the process, down by the hilt where it was still sharp. He stumbled aside, blood oozing through his hands, still yelling hosannas.

'You!' Shanni shouted.

The beast turned. Blood flowed from a hundred cuts, matting wiry fur to its skin. Close by it she saw humanity where before she had only seen impurity. A soul was there, in eyes as human as any she'd seen, soft and brown and scared. It bared flat teeth at her, spread its arms. It was beaten, but she could not afford mercy.

'Rest,' she said. 'The Emperor releases you from your suffering.'

It looked down at the sword sliding between its ribs, into its heart. It let out a last, sorrowful mewling.

'Rest,' she said. 'In the name of Him on Terra.'

The beast collapsed. There was no cheer of triumph. It had been no grand champion of Chaos, this pitiful beast, but although lowest of the Dark Gods' slaves, to the cultists it had been a special thing, and its death broke their spirit. That was her gift, to see such things, to change the course of what might be. Her gift from the Emperor.

Resistance on that part of the battlefield melted away. The circle of faithful broke apart, and pushed on to other killings. The enemy line, the true enemy line, was near.

A sudden booming clove the sky. Gunships raced overhead, hurling missiles and las-light before them. Upon their silver hulls ancient flowers of faith spread three petals. She glimpsed them only; they moved fast, and were soon gone into the smoke veiling the battlefield.

Lightning followed, and thunder, cast by the Emperor's hand. Orbital lance strikes. They were unerring, and the enemy suffered. Huge columns of white blasted up around their impact sites, the damned vaporised. The

cultists wavered, and then broke when another volley stabbed down, the beams so quick they were barely visible, yet each left a miraculous circle of ruin behind.

An avalanche of bodies falling back, that was how Shanni thought of an army in flight. The faithful chased after, running them down and slaughtering them as they howled salvation, while half a mile away the Adepta Sororitas deployed, and swept aside the Heretic Astartes in a torrent of bolt-fire and flame.

There were all the tasks of triumph to be accomplished. People counted, damage assessed, the demagogues and turncoats rooted out of the populace and burned first, before all the rest. Already the agents of the Ordo Hereticus attached to the crusade were rounding up the faithless. On a world that had suffered an uprising, the godless outnumbered the godly, but those who had not turned their back on the Emperor needed to be preserved. Sorting one from the other was arduous work.

These things were tedious to Canoness Gracia Emmanuelle of the Order of the Argent Shroud. The fight was done. She had no wish to secrete herself in a torturer's chamber. Let the priests deal with that. Her place was on the battlefield.

A jittery energy occupied her uneasily, alongside her exhaustion. The bunker she had taken for a command post was cramped and hot, and she wanted to get out of her armour for a few blessed moments, or better yet to pray undisturbed, just for half an hour, to give thanks to Him.

Only in death does service end, she rebuked herself. *Only in death.*

Shanni stood to attention. Incongruously, to Emmanuelle's mind, this skinny woman starved thin by fasting was as ramrod straight as a Tempestus Scion. Emmanuelle remembered the girl she brought to the space port on Gathalamor. That girl had been broken by fear, then remade by wonder. Now she had grown to a woman of a most ferocious sort. There was no fibre in her that suffered fear. She was drenched in gore head to foot, her hair plastered to her skull by it, her clothes hardening as they dried. Shanni stared a little upward, to the ceiling behind the canoness, but when she allowed herself to look at the Sister, her eyes were full of adoration.

'It is a miracle, Sister! Another miracle!'

The man kneeling between the canoness and the young woman was wild and unpredictable. The canoness did not like him for both of these reasons. Though he named himself a priest, she did not think him one in an official capacity. He had a robe, a priest's chainsword, a bolt pistol decorated with holy script, but both were old and dented. She doubted he had rounds for the gun, and the amulet around his neck was a lump of wood, it was no rosarius. A self-proclaimed priest, with the gloss of a battlefield investiture at best. The quality of priests was getting worse as the crusade went on. There were a hundred thousand holy men for every war, but the real ones, the ones raised and trained in Ministorum seminaries, were dying fast. She'd have her own preachers take a look at him later. If they couldn't calm him down, maybe they could use him better than she could, at least train him a little. For the time being, he was an annoyance.

'Praise be to the holy lord of Terra! Praise to the Golden Throne!' he yelled. He always yelled.

'Praise be,' murmured Emmanuelle. She was not interested in what he had to say. She was interested in Shanni.

The priest spoke on, quickly, his words tumbling over one another in their haste to exit his mouth and snarling each other up. 'Witness! There is no mark upon her. She strode through the fire of the enemy and brought low one of their champions. She is blessed! Praise be! Witness it!'

'Be quiet, Frateris Jelk,' said Palatine Marian. 'There is a time and a place for praise. That time is not now, when the canoness is trying to think.'

Emmanuelle gave her a quick look of thanks. 'Is what Jelk says true?' she asked Shanni.

'It is true! It is true!' wailed Jelk. He bent forward, pressing his forehead to the gritty, wet rockcrete.

'The canoness was asking Shanni, frateris,' Marian said. 'The Emperor commends your faith, but He requires silence from you now. Heed Him, or I will remove you.'

Emmanuelle looked closer at the supposed saint. 'None of this is your blood, Shanni?'

'No, Sister,' Shanni said proudly. 'He was with me. I was under His hand. Praise be for His protection!'

'By His hand are the righteous shielded,' Emmanuelle said thoughtfully. The stink coming off Shanni was intense in the enclosed space, beaten

copper, spoiling meat, cesspits, the secret smells of ruptured bodies, and her own odour under that. She had not washed for weeks. ‘And the champion?’

‘The frateris exaggerates. It was but an abhuman of the bestial strain, a low thing.’

‘Jelk?’ Emmanuelle asked.

‘She slew it with her own fair hand, the weak made strong, I saw it, so I did, I swear by the undying Emperor. She is but a girl but carries the strength of a saint in her hand!’ Jelk spoke quickly into the floor. ‘With its death, the enemy lost heart, this was before the Emperor cast His killing gaze upon the ground, and the Daughters of the Emperor fell among the fallen angels. Praise be for His victory!’

‘This much is true,’ Shanni said, and her voice was much calmer than Jelk’s, a small mercy, the canoness thought. ‘I saw it had an effect upon the morale of the lost, and sought it out. But I did not kill it alone. I only finished it off.’

‘Still,’ Marian said quietly. ‘An abhuman like that… They’re not weak. That is an impressive feat of arms.’

‘It did not strike me,’ said Shanni. ‘It could not. It saw it was defeated, and submitted itself to the Emperor’s judgement.’

‘Praise be to Him in His mercy,’ said Marian.

‘I commend you in His eye for your indomitable spirit, and fearless devotion,’ said Emmanuelle. ‘But listen first, before you take His blessing, and answer me. How many of the faithful did you lose in your attack?’

Shanni’s bloodied face wrinkled, and she looked at Emmanuelle in puzzlement. ‘How many?’

‘How many of the faithful died,’ the Palatine explained. ‘How many did you lose?’

‘I do not know,’ said Shanni. ‘A thousand, maybe. Two.’

‘Two thousand,’ said Emmanuelle. ‘Two thousand good and pure souls who were willing to die for their god, and for His Imperium.’

‘Yes, yes, and they died in glory!’ said Shanni. ‘They gave of themselves, and their blood blessed the earth of this world.’

‘They died needlessly,’ said the canoness calmly. ‘Their martyrdom came too early. Had you waited the five minutes I asked you to wait, maybe you would have lost a thousand. Maybe a few hundred. Instead, you chose to charge an artillery emplacement headlong.’

‘But the enemy were coming, they were advancing, we had to–’

‘You serve Him well, Shanni. You have since the moment He saved you on Gathalamor, but you should be more careful with His servants. Every death is one less warrior to bear arms against His foes.’

‘Every death brings glory to Him,’ Shanni said, but she was subdued now, her tone almost petulant. She had not expected rebuke.

‘That is no reason to spend lives so carelessly,’ said Emmanuelle gently. ‘You must be wiser. If we are to work for His greater glory, side by side, you must heed me, and follow my orders.’

‘I follow no orders but those of the Emperor,’ Shanni said.

‘Whose orders do you think I follow, Shanni? He speaks through me,’ said Emmanuelle. ‘I am an anointed canoness of His most holy Order of the Argent Shroud. Do you see this armour?’

Emmanuelle lifted her hands a little so Shanni might better look upon her panoply. It was scratched and dented from her own exertions upon the field.

She put her hand upon her Order’s badge. ‘These are the symbols of the holy Matriarch Silvana. This is her livery. I was not given these honours lightly. Do you understand? The Emperor’s aid is a powerful thing, it requires judgement to use it to the best advantage. I have the training, and the sanction of the Adeptus Ministorum. I give thanks in my prayers daily for the blessings the Emperor bestows upon you, young sister. But next time, wait for my order.’

Shanni nodded. Her eyes were brimming with tears.

‘I shall ask Him in my prayers for His guidance,’ she said. Her voice hitched.

‘I pray He will instruct you to seek guidance from me,’ said Emmanuelle. ‘Do so next time. You may go, Shanni. You too, Jelk.’

Shanni nodded, lip trembling. She could face down a squad of Heretic Astartes, but one rebuke from a holy Sister and she went to pieces. One of the many reasons she was not a Sister herself.

Jelk half turned his head, so he could peer with one eye up at Emmanuelle. She did not like the look in that eye. It was too sly. ‘We have many wounded,’ he said.

‘The Sisters Hospitaller will go among you soon, to minister to the faithful. Follow the usual protocols to speed their efforts. Mercy for those who cannot be helped, kindness for those who can.’

‘Thank you, canoness.’

‘By His will,’ said Emmanuelle.

‘For His glory,’ Jelk and Shanni responded.

Shanni made a stiff-fingered aquila over her heart. Jelk got up, mumbling prayers. The two Sisters waited for them to depart before speaking.

‘She’s dangerous, that one,’ said Marian, when they had gone.

‘She is. More so because she has great faith,’ said Emmanuelle tiredly. ‘She is also protected by the Emperor. That much is clear.’ She picked up her data-slate, and began flicking through the post-battle reports.

‘You still didn’t recruit her into the preceptory though, did you?’

‘That is because Shanni Saintsgift is unstable,’ said Emmanuelle. ‘She would never have got through the proving process, that’s if she would have survived the journey to Terra or Ophelia VII to take her vows, which is doubtful.’

‘That’s a poor excuse. How many others have you brought into our ranks and deferred their vows and bestowals?’

‘It is the truth, in her case.’

Marian pursed her lips thoughtfully. ‘They say a lot about her. She is never harmed, she sways the people around her, she has done ever since the primarch came to Gathalamor Imprezentia. You don’t think she’s a saint, do you?’ she asked. She was a beautiful woman still, young enough not to have picked up the many scars Emmanuelle had. She had rich brown skin, dominated by large and thoughtful eyes, but Marian was a hard woman. She’d been a novitiate at the preceptory on Gathalamor when the Rift broke the sky, back when Imelda was their canoness and Emmanuelle a Palatine, but that was a decade ago. The preceptory had been seconded to Fleet Primus, Imelda was dead, Emmanuelle had been granted her office, and Marian had risen quickly.

‘No,’ said Emmanuelle. ‘She does not show the signs.’

‘Not yet.’

‘She never will.’

‘But there is something there,’ Marian insisted. Her scalp was shaved and bold white tattoos of the Sororitas’ sacred lily around her head made her features seem starker than they actually were, like a carved saint.

‘He does watch her, I agree. Her faith is as strong as iron. I can feel it as a power around her. An invulnerability. She was an innocent when we found

her, but already she had been tested by the dark and saved by His own Custodians. She witnessed the rousing of the dead on Gathalamor. She was there when the primarch came to us. She is special, but she is no saint.’

‘She isn’t innocent any more.’

‘That much is true.’

Marian paused before speaking again. ‘She’s got a thirst for blood that worries me, canoness.’

‘So long as it is spilled in His name, what do we care?’ Emmanuelle tossed the data-slate onto the desk, the only piece of furniture in the room. The device crunched on the grit sprinkled across the table. ‘She is unstable, but she is useful among the faithful. She will learn her lesson and be more useful still, or she shall die fulfilling the function the Emperor decrees for her. So it is and so it has always been.’

‘As you judge it, so shall it be, by the Emperor’s will,’ said the Palatine. She put a hand on the canoness’ shoulder. ‘I shall find you something to eat and drink, holy Sister. We must nourish the body as much as the spirit if we are to do His work.’

As soon as it was said, Emmanuelle realised how hungry and thirsty she was.

‘That is so. Thank you, Marian.’

Another Sister entered the room then, followed by a messenger skull. ‘Canoness, there is an astropathic communication for you, priority ultima,’ the newcomer said. She was young. They were all so young. The rate of attrition in the Orders Militant was just as high as among the priests.

The skull floated forward. Marian bowed.

‘Marian,’ Emmanuelle said. ‘Be careful with this talk of saints. Not all that appears holy is so, and we do not have the authority to properly judge the miraculous. Shanni is favoured by the Emperor, but I do not want to hear rumours that suggest any more than that coming from among our ranks. The faithful are in a state of agitation, and will seize on every word we say. A crusade of faith is a marvellous thing, but it must be guided properly. We of all the Sisterhood must be most alert to signs of corruption masquerading as virtue. Is that clear?’

‘Yes, canoness. I understand.’

When Marian had gone, Emmanuelle attended to the message. It was short, and to the point.

‘Speak of providence, and He shall show it,’ Emmanuelle said.

‘Canoness?’ the Sister said.

‘Do we have a functioning uplink capable of reaching Groupmaster Ollaius? One of good quality. I’m tired of screaming over broken vox, and this will require some discussion.’

‘The enginseers are re-establishing this facility’s primary uplink.’

‘Where?’

‘On level eighteen.’

‘I do not know where that is,’ said Emmanuelle. ‘Take me there, then summon all surviving Sisters Superior. We are to leave this place as soon as we are able. The primarch calls, and the Argent Shroud shall respond.’

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Chapter Seventeen

DARK PRESENCE

KAPPA GREASE GANG

ALL HAVE DUTY

There was something there, in the dark. It was waiting, reaching for him. Long arms and sharp claws, and… and… a promise?

Allon didn't know what the promise was, but he knew the darkness frightened him.

The blare of klaxons made him start so hard from his sleep he jerked up from his hammock and banged his head on the ceiling. The blessings of the watch-priests murmured through the room. Whatever comfort their prayers might have offered the kappa grease gang was blasted apart by the klaxons and the shouts of the two greasemasters going down the rows, tipping those too slow to wake out of their hammocks.

'Get up, maggots! Up! Up! Up! The Emperor never rests, and yours is over. Get up!'

The sharp fizzle of their motivators cut the yawns and the grumbles. Whoever had been shocked yelped. Ozone mixed with the smell of unwashed bodies, old grease, farts and bad breath.

'Allon, Allon! Come on, my friend, get up.'

Oost spoke to him gently from the next hammock. There wasn't much kindness deep in the lower decks of *Faith's Anvil*, and Oost harboured most of it. He looked about for scraps of it and hoarded it, ready to deploy when it was needed most. 'Come on, the greasemasters are coming.'

Oost and Allon were friends, had been ever since Allon had come aboard. You got to know someone very well when your backsides banged together in every storm. The hammocks were less than an inch apart.

'I'm getting up,' Allon said. He rubbed his head, shaved since forever to stop ship lice taking hold. He didn't feel well. 'Emperor, I'm sure they never give us the full four hours.'

'We've had it, really. Time to work.'

Allon sighed. His breath tasted sour. Sitting up in the hammock was never easy, and it swung about as he got out of it, tangling his legs, nearly making him fall. His feet touched the deck just as the ship jumped. It was a violent skip, not deep but sudden and hard. Small noises of dismay sounded round the room. Allon stumbled backwards. Oost caught him.

'Steady there!'

'Alright, maggots, just the ship a-dancing in the stream!' shouted Greasemaster Ivers. 'You've lived out a hundred storms and you'll live out a hundred more. Get a move on. Shift's starting in forty minutes, eat so you can do your duty.'

Allon thanked his friend and started to take down the hammock from its rusty hooks. He had to stop before he rolled it up. He felt nauseous. Pressure mounted behind his eyes. He massaged the bridge of his nose.

'Allon? Allon? You alright?' Oost came round the front of him and gave a little gasp. 'Throne alive, you look terrible! You're grey as rags.'

'Throne-cursed warp nightmares. Gives me the head,' Allon said. 'That's all.'

'They're bad this time,' Oost said with a shudder. 'Mine are.'

'They are.' Allon rolled his hammock. The ship shook again. He kept his footing this time. Chains rattled somewhere out in the corridor.

Greasemaster Golus shoved his way through the grease gang's cramped quarters. The gang were stowing their hammocks in their small void chests with many a grimace and a complaint. 'Come on, you two, quit your romancing. You're getting slow, Allon.'

'Let him be, Golus, he's had a bad night.'

‘Master Golus!’ Golus said, sweeping the metal stick of his motivator in front of Oost. He did not activate it. It was a shock maul, really. The gang’s name for it was something of a dark joke.

‘Did he, now? You know what they say, service is its own reward. Don’t keep us all waiting. Efficiency’s down and I’ll not have that on my file, and the others won’t thank you if they miss breaking their fast because I’m wasting time kicking you out of the door.’

Every day was the same. Eight-hour shifts separated by four-hour rests. When the gang was up, a big pot of gruel was brought in by one of the galley gangs. Everyone below decks had their own species of unpleasantness to attend to. Slopping grease wasn’t nice, but Allon was glad he didn’t work in the galleys.

Their dormitory doubled as their refectorium. They ate sat on their void chests, hunched over their bowls while one of the ship’s watch-priests walked up and down the narrow room reading homilies from a small black book. Everyone should have got a blessing, but a little bribe here or there, extra food, found materials, unsavoury favours – the gangs did not get paid – saw that some of them got more attention from the Emperor than others. Allon didn’t bother most of time they plied the materium, but when they sailed the warp he craved the Emperor’s protection, and wasn’t above paying for a little extra, one way or another.

After eating, they performed their ablutions. They had three ablutorials between forty of them. One had never worked. It looked like it hadn’t worked for centuries. What happened to their leavings, he didn’t know, but from his previous life as an agricultor he suspected it was utilised somehow. On a closed system like the ship, nothing went to waste.

Allon cleaned his teeth. He had no brush, but used a rough bit of rag wrapped around his finger. It was better than nothing. When he’d arrived, the others had mocked him for the custom, until he’d pointed out he still had his teeth and they generally didn’t, then the practice had spread; first among the gang, then further afield. Keeping his teeth clean helped him remain a little human. There was very little water for them that low down the pecking order, so they didn’t wash often, once every three months, if they were lucky, but they did shave, everywhere. Ship lice would colonise a single shaft of hair in huge villages, and they were a greater scourge than

the nine devils of Horus once they got hold. For that reason, he bore the application of blunt razors to his most sensitive parts stoically.

Like their shit and piss, the hair was used. Bagged up, taken away, every last bristle. Maybe he'd find out where it went one day. The grease gangers got around the ship. They saw things. He supposed they were luckier than most in that regard. He knew crew members that worked forever in a single room. The ship was hell enough for him after the wide open spaces of home. He would have gone insane if locked in a single room.

So they ate, shaved, shat, brushed, prayed. All that in forty minutes. Six hours, twenty minutes of work was ahead. Then another forty minutes to eat, shave, shit, brush and pray, then four hours of sleep, then the same thing over and over and over again. Repeat ad nauseam, forever until he died, which wouldn't be long given the rations and exhaustion and his Throne-damned headaches!

Ave Imperator.

Golus turned about, looked down the double line of men waiting to move out. He had wicked little eyes.

'Was that blasphemy, Greaser Allon?'

He hadn't realised he had spoken aloud.

'A sincere oath to He of Terra,' said Allon.

Oost sniggered silently. Golus grunted and walked away.

'Right. Duties for today coming down the line courtesy of Greasemaster Ivers. Take the chit, read the chit, grab your buckets, and go out to do your duty, for the Imperium of Mankind and the immortal Emperor we serve!'

His words were hollow, and that hollow was half-full of despair. Ivers and Golus were masters of that place, but that didn't amount to very much.

'Alright for him to blaspheme,' Oost said. His breath tickled Allon's ear. His mouth smelled bad. There was a tooth turning on him, somewhere in his mouth.

'Shush,' Allon said.

Ivers thrust a piece of rough card into Allon's hand. 'Fifteenth deck, aft quarter, sectors ten through twenty, all the doors, anything else that needs it. Then on to fourteenth, thirteenth, twelfth. Same job, same sectors. You hear, maggot?'

Allon nodded. Ivers grinned. Four missing front teeth formed a perfect square of wet blackness in the front. It was a nasty grin, but Ivers was the

gentler of the two.

‘Get to go out with your little friend there,’ he said, and licked his lips.

‘Right,’ Allon said levelly.

‘You too, maggot.’ He moved on, winking hideously at Oost.

The water boy came next, in through the only door, which shut behind him so quick it almost caught his cart. It had one wonky wheel, making the scratched bottles tinkle in their crates, and sloshing about the pint of brown water in each. All they had to drink, every day. Sometimes, Allon thought he might go mad with thirst. He knew enough about the human body to know he was permanently dehydrated.

Allon got his. Oost’s was half full. He tried to hide it, but Allon saw.

‘You pay him off with your rations again so we could buddy up?’

He was forbidden to turn round, but he heard the apologetic smile in Oost’s reply.

‘Yeah, I don’t get thirsty. Much prefer to spend time with you.’

‘You got to stop doing it, man. You’ll dry yourself to death.’

‘Meh, lose a little water for a lot of friendship.’

‘Lot of friendship,’ Allon said with a nod. It was their secret, shared catchphrase, a touchstone of sanity in all the squalor.

‘Emperor’s truth,’ Oost said. ‘And better than teaming with Filtz.’

Filtz turned round. Nobody rebuked him for that. He was the biggest, meanest greaser on the gang. Over six feet. His shoulders were hunched with bending over all the time, dotted with sores where they’d scraped at the ceiling, but they still bulged with muscle.

‘You talking about me?’

‘Only the best of things are being said,’ Allon said.

‘Loser,’ Filtz grunted.

‘Filtz,’ Golus warned. He pointed the tip of his maul at the giant. Filtz pointed at his eyes, then pointed at Allon before turning back to face front.

A whistle blew. The door shot up into the ceiling. Oil-tainted steam blasted over them all. The door was not void-sealed. It existed to keep them in, nothing more.

‘Out out out!’ Golus said. He had his greasemaster’s timepiece clutched in one dirty paw of a hand.

The first line jogged out of the room, into the warren of passages outside.

‘Out out out!’ Golus’ voice sounded angry, but he was nodding with approval.

‘Looks like we’re out on schedule today,’ Oost said.

‘Yeah,’ said Allon. ‘So maybe he’ll be less of a bastard tomorrow.’

Oost snorted. ‘Not likely.’

They each had a tank of ancient plastek, much patched and repaired. These were kept on racks in the corridor outside the greasers’ room, a mercy Allon was grateful for. He wore the damn thing all day. He didn’t want to be anywhere near it while he slept.

Whistles commanded their movements, shrill blasts herding them to the racks, turning them about, demanding the gangers don them.

On Allon’s pack there had been attachment points cast into the plastek, but they were broken. He saw a hint of the care with which they had been made in the curved moulding that remained. Replacement clips had been inexpertly screwed into the pack. The screw holes had been enthusiastically sealed with some sort of glue, so at least it didn’t leak, but they’d been set wrong. One was slightly too high, the other was slightly too far in. They pulled at each of his shoulders in their own torturous manner, and over time his posture was changing to fit. This didn’t make carrying the tank any easier, just meant that he carried the pain of it back to his hammock every night with him.

The ship jumped again. It was doing that a lot.

The straps were leather. Once he’d wondered where they got leather from, then reminded himself that nothing was wasted aboard the ship, and decided never to think about it again.

Another whistle blast. They took turns under the grease spring, a huge tank set over the corridor, crimping the ceiling down even lower so even the shortest of them had to bend to pay obeisance to the lord of slime. Screw the Emperor, that frekking tank was their god, and it demanded humility. Filtz had to go down on both knees. Nobody dared laugh at him, except Oost.

Ivers wound the clockwork on the god of greases. Golus’ whistle shrieked. Mechanically, the grease gang reached up to the tank in front, and unscrewed the cap. Allon guessed these too had once been plastek, but most now had metal replacements. A whistle started the filling process.

The trick was to get under the nozzle and make sure it was full over the aperture, or better yet, rested inside. The soft hose made a series of horrible, peristaltic heaves that filled each tank up precisely. If you moved at the wrong time, then you'd get a little slippery. Allon was always slightly greasy. That was the way he had been since he had been dragged screaming from his home. He remembered not being that way, permanently covered in a slick layer, but he had become so used to it he wouldn't have seen it as unusual if it weren't for the way the officers kept their distance, on those rare occasions that he saw them.

The grease stank.

Peep! The whistle shrieked. The next man went under. Peep! Then the next. Soon it was Allon's turn, then Oost's. Peep! Peep! Peep!

'To your duties, voidsmen!' Golus shouted. 'He expects your all – for humanity, for the Imperium! For the primarch!' For once, he was trying to be inspirational.

'On with it, maggots!' Ivers screeched. His insults whistled out between his cave-mouth teeth. 'Maggots! Maggots!'

Allon scooped his pipe and nozzle from its hook, Oost followed.

'Throne take it all, where's my damn pipe?' Oost was looking around helplessly. His allotted peg was empty. 'Emperor!' he said, half whimpering.

'Oh, it's probably up there, behind the spares bins.'

The spares bins were a rickety rack of open metal boxes, full of screws, washers, and other odds and ends.

'Why would it be there?' said Oost. He went anyway, poked about, then fished out his pipe and nozzle. He held it up. 'How did you know?'

'I probably saw it fall,' said Allon.

'What, fall eight feet sideways?'

'Could be the storm,' said Allon.

'Could be Filtz,' said Oost darkly. 'Bastard's always trying to get me into trouble.'

Oost never, ever suggested Allon had done it. They were friends. But he looked at him a little strangely, like he always did when Allon knew things that he shouldn't.

Truth was, Allon had always been a bit that way, able to find things, knowing what might happen next, guessing the numbers on the dice in the

taverna back home, then one day he'd been a bit more that way. He didn't really take much note at the time, but he supposed it must have been about when the Rift had split the sky. He didn't like to dwell on that either.

'Stop making the lovey eyes at each other, you!' Golus screeched. 'On with it!'

'Yeah yeah, whatever,' Oost said. 'Come here, turn round, we're falling behind.'

Timed by the whistles, they helped each other screw the pipes into their sockets. They picked up a bucket full of rags each, then trotted along the corridor, all in a line that passed one of the watch-priests. He blessed their day's labours, then the line shrank as each team of two broke off and vanished into the innards of the *Faith's Anvil*. Golus' exhortations and Ivers' insults grew quieter, until they were lost under the clatter of footsteps on the deck and their ill-fitting equipment. Then Oost and Allon took their own turn, and were finally, mercifully, alone. They slowed down. Allon turned to his friend and they grinned at each other.

'Let's get to it then,' Allon said.

'In the Emperor's name, let there be grease!' Oost said, and cackled.

Allon didn't mind working. It took his mind off what had happened to him, and there wasn't much oversight while they gridded their assigned area, deploying their grease when they spotted something on the verge of seizing. They only did the small stuff: doors, hatches, handles. Proper equipment was left to the adepts and their servants, and they worked only in certain places, because other areas of the ship had their own maintenance teams. It seemed unimportant, what they did, but Allon supposed it had to be done, and he'd drawn the short straw in having to do it. Being out on the job was the only bearable part of his life. Provided they didn't make too much noise and showed the proper respect, and of course applied the grease, they were pretty much left to their own devices.

'Does anybody even ever come down here?' Oost asked. He was playing his nozzle over the runners of a door. They were so rusty Allon couldn't guess when it had last been closed, never mind when it had last been greased. 'Help me with this, would you?'

Allon leaned on the door, grunting and heaving until it moved. Then he shoved it back and forth along the tracks while Oost applied grease, rubbing it into the rust with one of the rags.

‘This is servitors’ work,’ Oost said. He said that at least once a day.

‘Servitors are too expensive,’ Allon replied, like he always did. ‘You’re free.’

‘By the Emperor’s will, I serve.’ It was the closest Oost ever got to admitting that they were little more than slaves. He squirted more grease. ‘Tell me about the green,’ Oost said.

Allon didn’t like to speak to Oost of the time before. He didn’t like to talk to anyone about it, but Oost was hungry for it. Unlike Allon, Oost had never known anything but Golus, Ivers, grease and tight spaces deep in the ship.

‘What do you want to know?’ he said. He tried not to let his reluctance show. He at least had something else once. He had had a wife, and two sons, and a daughter, and he prayed with all his soul to the Emperor, the eight sainted primarchs, and the returned Avenging Son, that he still did, and that they were safe. Kept safe, he hoped, at least in part by his efforts. Believing that was the only thing that kept him going.

‘What does it smell like?’

Allon thought a moment, searching for something that approximated the smell of the high forest near his home, and the wide agri fields at the bottom of the hill, where the great tractors moved back and forth, back and forth.

‘A broken biolume,’ he said. He assumed they had some sort of luminescent algae in them. They smelled like plants.

‘Yuck,’ said Oost. ‘Try it now.’ Allon moved the door back and forth. Oost nodded. ‘That’s a good one. The High Lords of Terra themselves will commend our efforts there.’

They both laughed.

‘On to the next,’ said Oost.

‘When I say a biolume, I mean, that’s the closest thing. Imagine it doesn’t smell as strong, about a dozen times less strong, let’s say, and there isn’t the smell of shit about them. Also imagine it smells pleasant.’

‘That’s a lot of imagination you’re asking of me there.’

‘Hey, imagination is a man’s only friend in here,’ Allon said. He meant it lightly, but a sense of foreboding settled on him like a coat of ice and his smile died. He didn’t hear what Oost said in reply.

Oost waved a hand in front of him.

‘Hey in there, I said I’m your friend.’

‘Too right. So imagination and Oost, my only friends.’

Oost laughed. He moved on. There were giant valve wheels, seven in a row, set into a recess in the wall.

‘I’ve no idea what these do,’ Oost said. ‘But they certainly need greasing.’

The ship shuddered. Allon wobbled.

Allon.

‘Did you hear that?’ he called down to Oost, but though Oost was only eight feet away, he was whistling and had his head in the recess where the valve wheels were.

Allon. Allon. Let me release you.

There was an aperture in the wall, a square of darkness. The grille that had shut it off had rusted through. He assumed it was a ventilation shaft or something like that, but no air came from it.

Allon! Allon!

The voice changed. It was familiar. His wife’s voice?

‘I’m finally going mad,’ he whispered. He shouldn’t go near it, he knew instinctively, but he couldn’t keep away, and he approached the hole with tiny, terrified steps.

Come home, Allon! Come back to me!

His put his face close to the hole. The weak light of the biolumes could not penetrate, but made the darkness stronger, walling it off with a sheet of blackness.

‘Rasi?’ he breathed. ‘Rasi?’ He leaned close.

‘Hey, Allon!’ A hand fell on his shoulder.

A sharp buzz of terror seized Allon. He spun round, shoving Oost hard. Taken by surprise, the smaller man hit the far wall hard and nearly fell. He stayed there a moment, awkwardly bent over, his face slack with surprise. Allon hated him in that moment, for being so simple and happy in this hell. It passed quickly, but the hatred was real.

Oost pushed himself off the metal, slumped, gripping his bruised shoulder.

‘What by the Throne has got into you?’

The ship jumped. Far off, metal groaned. It almost sounded like a scream.

‘Oost…’

Allon reached for his friend. Oost took a step back.

‘It’s nothing. It’s the storm. I’m sorry.’

‘The storm.’

‘Yeah. They get us all, don’t they? Oost, Oost. I’m sorry, yeah?’

Oost stared at him a second longer, then nodded. ‘Yeah. Fine. The storm.’ He was trying to convince himself. ‘You sure you’re alright?’

‘Yeah. I think so.’ Allon looked into the hole one last time. Slanted rhomboids of illumination went some way in now, and there were no more voices.

Oost rotated his shoulder. ‘Come on then, these valves won’t grease themselves.’ He set off back down the corridor. When Allon didn’t follow he turned back. ‘Allon, come on. I don’t want Golus riding us for messing up his schedules.’

Reluctantly, Allon left the hole.

He rubbed the back of his head and winced. His headache had returned.

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Chapter Eighteen

WARP STORM

HOME

GATEWAY

The storm worsened through the day. By the end of the shift, lubricating even the easiest machines became a test of skill. Allon and Oost returned to their quarters slick with spillage and in foul moods because of it, fearful the greasemasters would punish them for wastage. Allon’s headache didn’t get any worse, but it didn’t get any better either, while even the irrepressible Oost remained subdued as both fretted over the punishments they might receive.

Their worries were unfounded. Every crew came back bedraggled and besmirched. Filtz’s partner was covered in the stuff, and his pack was broken. Filtz had an expression so furious it would give an Angel of Death pause. Normally, Golus and Ivers would have beaten the man, but they too were nervy and quiet. The ship’s violent motions were constant by then. It rolled from side to side to a steady rhythm, and violent pitches came unpredictably, upsetting any attempt to ride out the motions. They ate their food in frightened silence. They had experience of storms. All of them were hardened voidsmen, even Allon, who alone had not been born on the ship. But this storm tested the best of them, and a few became void sick.

There was little chatter, no joking. They performed their nightly rituals as best they could, and when the watch-priest visited their section to lead them in worship, they prayed harder than usual.

That night Allon slept fitfully. Most of the time he was caught in the hyperreal state between true sleep and wakefulness. He was aware of the greasy, smelly fabric of the hammock, every violent lurch of the *Faith's Anvil*, the stink of vomit and flatulence. He could hear the snores of the gangers who couldn't care less about the storm, and the whimpers of those who could think of nothing else. He heard and knew all this even as he dreamed.

He was dreaming of home.

The last of the leaves in the mountains had finally begun to turn. There'd be no more purples and reds soon, only the yellow of trees preparing for long slumber. The summer had been magnificent. Long, and hot and peaceful. In the villages around the plains, the festivals of thanks had been lavish. That time of year, everyone had an easygoing, pleased air. Everyone from the farm-masters to the lowest indentured worker was sleek and well fed. There had been little sickness. The skies were full of the long shapes of starships come to take the harvest's bounty. They never had any trouble filling the exacta. The crops grew, the ships came, tribute was offered up to distant Terra, the ships left. They had no impact on Allon's life, until they did.

Allon walked along the margins of the woods. On the plains, the agricolae machines took in the last of the harvest, neatly gridding fields that stretched away to the horizon.

The farms were well run, efficient, each one consistently providing one hundred and thirty per cent on their expected yields. Up in the hills, the forests were deep. Small brooks joined and rejoined until they were swift rivers, unbounded by rockcrete like they were on the plains. Soon after the land flattened out, they were caught and directed into huge reservoirs, but up there, they were wild. The forests were big enough to support a remnant of wildlife, and the woods were full of animals.

Allon worked on the plain as an overseer. He liked to think he was a good man, and used his workforce kindly. But the hills were his home.

Dry grasses whispered in a breeze that hardly stirred the heat from the land. It had been hot for weeks. Almost too hot. Midday forced a stop in

work. The evenings were at least bearable.

He was reaching the boulder where he'd turn inwards, going on the path through the trees. The boulder was big, eight yards tall. It blocked his view of his village. He liked that moment, where he turned around its base, carved with rough shrines to the Emperor, and saw the village on the slope lit by lanterns.

But that would not happen, not ever again. He had already seen his home for the final time, not that he knew it then. This was his last night. He knew it all of a sudden. He remembered. A dread filled him up, and as soon as he let it in, the voice began to speak.

'Allon.'

He stopped and turned towards the trees. The voice came from there, the same voice from the night before. The same he had heard in the empty duct. This time, he was not scared.

'Hello?' he said.

Something rustled.

'Do you remember, Allon? This was the night you were taken. Do you remember?' The voice came with the breeze in the leaves. The forest was speaking to him. He found it comforting.

'Hello?' he said again. He took a step towards the limits of the wood. The path was dirt trodden hard by villagers' feet and the hammering summer sun. The forest was all cool shadows. There were local legends about the woods at night. They were just stories, he thought. Wherever people go, they make stories.

Allon looked away from the trees across the plain. The trees sighed and tossed their dying leaves. The giant harvesters on the plain shone hard lumen lamps onto the crops and drove over them. Waving stalks became stubble in an instant. If he listened very carefully, he could hear the shushing hiss of grain pumped into the following trailers.

'Allon. They are coming for you. You remember. You approach the stone. The sky fills with lights. The men come. They take you. They take you to your hell in the void.'

He did know. He remembered the roar of engines. He assumed the ships had been to a nearby village, pressing men. It happened, from time to time, to everyone's regret, but he was of too high a class to be eligible. Until they saw him by chance and they landed. It was a fluke. A whim of the officer in

charge of the press gang. He was alone, an easy target, a bonus to their haul. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

‘I’m a bloody overseer! You can’t do this!’ he had said to them.

‘You are now a member of the Emperor’s Imperial Navy, and I can do whatever I like with you,’ said their officer. A blast from a shock prod had sent him crashing down into darkness, and he had never seen the sky again.

He missed the sky.

‘I can change that,’ said the voice. ***‘I can make it so they fly overhead, and you will look up and you will wonder if the voidsmen of the Emperor have come for fresh bodies. In a few days’ time you will hear of the pressing, and you will share your unease with your wife, and then you will forget about it and live out your days in peace.’***

A crackling noise came from the woods. He turned back to find a tree on fire, just one. Though they were all enmeshed with one another, their branches entwined, only one burned. The flames were strange, heatless, and they moved oddly, in many hues of blue, red, purple and white. The light they cast seemed strangely alive.

‘Let me in, Allon. Let me in and you can stay here. You can go home. Let me in, and I shall make you happy.’

‘How can you do this?’ he asked.

‘There are many gods with many gifts. I serve He Who Changes Ways.’ The voice came from the fire now. The flames made a wall of fiery eyes that whirled around in time to the words. ***‘It is but a small thing I ask of you, and an easy thing for me to make your pain go away. Do you not wish to see your wife again?’*** The eyes pulsed and swam beguilingly. The words ate up the world with their promises.

He thought of his wife. She appeared before him, naked and smiling, only her eyes were the eyes on the burning tree, spinning around and around in fractal regard. She reached out her hands.

‘Come home, Allon,’ she said. ***‘Let me in.’***

He knew it was wrong. Any fool could see that, but he didn’t care. He could smell his dirty hammock, smell the vomit, hear the pleas of his crewmates frightened by the storm. Upon this vision of his home, his paradise, where he had been content, the filthy reality of the Emperor’s service overlaid itself. His teeth ground as he thought about the last three years of crushing misery, and he did not care that it was wrong.

‘I want to go home,’ he said.

‘Then turn the corner of the stone, and walk away,’ the woman said. She wasn’t his wife. She didn’t even look like her any more. Her arms were unnaturally thin and studded with quills. Her face had taken an avian aspect.

He walked past her. He reached the boulder. The statues of the Emperor sitting in their niches all had the heads of birds.

He rested his hand on the rough stone as he had every day when he was coming home. It was not for balance, but to ground himself, to pass thanks directly from himself to the Lord of Mankind. The rock was rough and familiar. He looked up the hill, and saw his village in the dark, the rough stone walls lit by pools of lumen light.

He set off, free, his feet carrying him quickly. He smiled, happy.

Then he was no more.

‘Allon? Allon?’

The ship rolled violently.

‘Over here! Help!’ Oost shouted. ‘Allon’s having some kind of fit!’

The ship pitched heavily. The hammocks swung, smashing the occupants together. Golus came staggering down the way, shoving at the crew hard.

‘What by the nine devils are you screaming about?’

Allon shook so hard his teeth chattered. His hands contorted in front of them.

‘He’s having a fit!’

‘I can see that myself, you damn fool,’ Golus said.

His words were hard but he dithered. None of them had any kind of medicae skill.

Ivers shoved his way through, and gave Allon a look over. ‘We’ll have to take him to the Chapel of Mercy,’ he said. ‘I’ve seen this before. He might be alright, might not be.’

‘Nobody ever comes back from there!’ Oost said.

‘He’ll die here,’ said Ivers simply.

Oost looked to Golus.

‘What, you want me to take him up-decks to the medicae bays? Can you see that, them treating one of us? Greasemaster Ivers is right. Chapel of Mercy’s his only hope. Get ready to move him.’

Golus pushed his way back through the hammocks, shouting for the casualty bier. A couple of the more alert greasers were already about it.

By now, the others were sitting up, peeking over the edges of their hammocks to see what was going on.

‘Stop gawping!’ Oost said angrily. His eyes ran with tears at the thought of losing his friend.

The ship moaned and slid forward, like a back-world canoe cresting a killer wave, and falling to its destruction.

‘Allon! Allon! My friend. Please!’ Oost grabbed Allon’s shirtfront.

Allon moaned. His fingers twitched, straightened, crooked in like claws.

‘Allon, it’s me, Oost!’

Allon’s head lolled at an unnatural angle, bending too far to the rear, his back arching like a fiddle bow to accommodate the extreme movement. It described a long circle, his neck popping with the effort. Then he smiled.

‘What’s wrong with his eyes?’ said Ivers.

They were dark as Old Night from the legends. There was a flicker far back in them, as if they weren’t eyes at all, but long tunnels down which tiny men bearing torches were running towards them. Ivers leaned back, his head half-turned, like he wanted to look away but could not.

‘Oost! Get away from him.’

Allon stopped shaking.

‘Allon!’

A low, feline growl escaped Allon’s mouth, and his lips twisted into a grin full of such awful knowledge that Oost felt faint.

‘Allon is not here any more,’ said a voice that was most definitely not Allon’s. ***‘He’s gone home.’***

A sense of evil flooded the room. The crew reacted with bovine fearfulness and scrambled out of their hammocks. A couple snarled their feet in the cloth and fell down, taking half a dozen others with them. The ship rolled again. The lumens winked out. The only light in the room seeped in from outside. Allon’s eyes were blazing fires in the bottomless dark of forever.

‘He’s a damn witch!’ Ivers said. His usual harshness was gone, his voice wet and choked. ‘A damn witch.’

The thing that had been Allon laughed again. Limbs popped, bending against the lie of their joints, and he crept spider-legged from his hammock.

‘Oh, I am much worse than that,’ it said. The lights raced up the long tunnels of his eyes, and billowed forth as a multicoloured spray of living flame.

The fire caught Ivers full-on. He screamed as his face melted back to the bone, collapsing into a waxy mess of dissolving flesh. Somehow, he was still alive, still trying to scream. His legs kicked, and his burning head set hammocks alight. Impregnated with grease, the cloth took flame instantly.

Oost stepped back. The room was full of smoke. Men ran blindly about, forgetting where the door was in their panic.

The Allon-thing was coming for him, eyes alight with more than fire now. Malice burned there just as bright.

‘Lot of friendship,’ the thing mocked him. ***‘Let me keep you warm.’***

Fire engulfed Oost. It took him far too long to die.

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Chapter Nineteen

INVASION

PERIMETER

NEVERBORN

Messinius paced the command deck. His heavy steps counted out time, three steps to each second. He walked slowly, lost in thought. He was thinking about what the primarch needed from him. To be so regarded by the living son of the Emperor would more than satisfy the honour of the most ambitious of men. But he liked to know what he was going to do before he did it. He had changed himself from the reckless young Scout into a captain of high renown by embracing considered action. If he planned, he could run free in battle, knowing that he had already covered all eventualities. He was a great user of the Macraggian dialectic, that theoretical-practical split the Ultramarines were known for.

He knew himself well, as all men who wish to lead successfully must. When he was blind to the future, he became too reactive, responding to situations rather than crafting an appropriate strategy. He fell back upon the moment.

Calm, he told himself. *This will pass. The unknown is knowable, and will soon be so. Do not speculate. Wait to act.*

A blaring alarm far down the deck snapped him out of his meditations. His head came up quickly. The third lieutenant running the desk where the alarm was sounding gave a hopeless look at Messinius striding down the deck, past the many command pits and promontories where the deck officers oversaw hundreds of ensigns and servitors.

Messinius made him panic. ‘Shut it down, shut it down!’ he shouted as the Space Marine approached. The lord lieutenant reached the edge of the pit, and stared down at the hapless man as he chivvied his team to obey.

‘What is the nature of the emergency?’

‘Fire, sir, nothing serious.’

‘Fire on a voidship is always serious,’ Messinius said. ‘Provide more detail.’

The officer got more flustered. Men and women at the surrounding stations continued to work with the studied care of eavesdroppers.

‘It’s a minor fire, on the seventieth deck.’ The ship rumbled. The storm was a bad one. The man pointed at a screen where numbers left phosphorescent trails as they swept down the glass. ‘A greasing gang’s quarters, my lord.’

‘Greasing gang?’

‘Lubricators. Low menials. The oils they use are flammable, and their areas are prone to fire. We’re used to it. We’ll have it under control in a moment.’ He leaned forward and whispered to one of his minions, as if a Space Marine, imbued with the superhuman gifts of the Emperor Himself, would not be able to hear. ‘Get the suppression system working!’

‘Datacast the information to me, third lieutenant,’ Messinius said. He unclamped his helm from his waist and placed it on his head.

‘Really, my lord, it is not necessary. We shall have it under control very shortly.’

‘Now,’ said Messinius. He could not understand why the man was resisting him. Some sort of misguided professional pride? He activated his helm display.

‘Of course, my lord, datacasting now.’

The ship dropped heavily. Mutters went up around the deck, annoyance mostly, but there was a little fear mixed in.

Messinius looked over the welter of data captured by the ship’s sprawling sensorium. They were so vast, the ships of the Imperium, that a minor

emergency of this kind could take a long time to be reported. *The human body does not recognise a few cancerous cells*, he thought, *until it is too late.*

A primitive map fizzled into being, all green lines, no detail, simple angular sketches of the ship's internal spaces. Fire indicators blinked in the room marked as 'Lubricators' Dormitory Kappa-020', and in the corridor outside. Bulkhead doors were closed. Fire suppression system was on.

'The fire suppression does not seem to be working,' said Messinius.

'No, my lord, a small matter. Sometimes the sensors malfunction.'

'What manner of suppression do you use? Carbon dioxide from the air scrubbing system?'

'Yes, my lord.'

'The atmospherics give an air mix reading of nearly zero per cent oxygen.'

'The fire consumes oxygen.'

'Yes. It does, so it should put itself out, even if the suppression system is not working. So could you explain to me why it is spreading?'

The officer stared at his screen as if it had just materialised in front of him, to his great surprise. 'They shouldn't be able to get through…' He leant over one of the desks and fiddled with the knobs. Sweat dripped onto the desk. 'It has to be a sensorium problem.'

Messinius looked at the temperature gauge in the upper right of his field of view. 'These readings are inconsistent.'

'The sensorium, my lord–'

'Is malfunctioning in all compartments, on every kind of sensor, in the same way?' He blinked the images away. 'You.' He pointed at the woman the officer was leaning over. 'Are you next in command of this station?'

'Yes, my lord.'

'Name?'

'Ensign Venna Sharred.'

'Then you are now in command, Third Lieutenant Sharred. Congratulations on your promotion.' He pointed to the ex-officer. 'You are demoted. Attend to the watch master for your new assignment. Sharred, despatch ignis control teams to the site. Evacuate all personnel within one hundred yards of the fire.'

Sharred was wise enough not to list the difficulties that posed. The lower decks were cramped, crammed, and poorly charted.

‘I am attending myself.’ Messinius left the fire control team, and switched to private Adeptus Astartes vox-channels. ‘Thothven,’ he said.

‘My lord.’

‘How many Librarians do we have on this ship still?’

‘Two, my lord, Epistolaries Tillanus and GonFeest.’

‘Bring them, half our number, and yourself to this location. I shall meet you there. Have the rest of the Unnumbered Sons divide in half again. Post one group to form a perimeter around this zone.’ He sent an annotated cartolith via data-pulse. ‘The rest are to come to the command deck. Remain at a state of high readiness.’

‘An emergency?’

‘A fire.’

‘Not only that, I guess.’

‘I am unsure. I have a foreboding, and it is wise to act on such feelings whilst in the warp. If I am wrong, I am wasting a few hours of time. If I am right, our survival hangs in the balance.’

He changed channels to the Navigatorial manse.

‘Can we execute warp egress?’ Messinius demanded.

‘Impossible.’ The voice of Navigator Faey Balevolio was strained. She was the lesser of the three on the *Faith’s Anvil*, and therefore the one delegated to communicate with the command deck while the other two members of her house wrestled with the tides of the warp. *‘The storm is strong. We serve as beacon vessel for one-third of the group. If we exit now, that third of the battle group will follow, and that will certainly cause ships to founder.’*

‘We have a possible incursion,’ Messinius said.

‘We sense nothing.’

‘It is happening,’ Messinius said.

‘Perhaps… The storm? I cannot see. We cannot see.’ She sounded dreamy, lost.

‘We were due to arrive tomorrow. We must be close to our destination. How long until we can effect translation?’

‘It would be safest to leave only when the storm abates. That may be too late. The choice is yours, lord. If we commit to an emergency translation, we may survive. Many others will not.’

A poor choice between definite death for all aboard the *Faith’s Anvil* or the probable loss of several other ships.

‘Then we fight. Prioritise warp exit when safe enough to do so.’

‘*We understand and obey,*’ the Navigator responded.

Messinius cut the vox.

Messinius could smell the fire long before he reached it. He found the ignis control teams falling back, fire suits blackened, supporting badly burned comrades.

He grabbed their chief. ‘What happened?’

The man pulled off the tall, cylindrical hood he was wearing, revealing a sweat-drenched face streaked with soot. His relief at seeing Messinius was obvious, and Messinius took that as a very bad sign. ‘The fire, my lord – our equipment is useless. It moves strangely.’

‘The grav-plates are out?’

The man coughed. He shook his head, wiped his mouth on his gauntlet. ‘It’s not a zero-gravity fire. It’s something else. It moves strangely!’

‘Withdraw your men. There are other Adeptus Astartes coming. When they are through, tell Captain Thothven that you have orders to seal this section behind them. Do not let anyone in or out. Call in armsmen on my authority, station them at all major junctions. Nothing is to get in or out of the defined area, do you understand?’

The ignis chief nodded. ‘Yes, lord lieutenant.’

‘Then go!’

Messinius headed on. According to the feed his helm display provided, the fire was spreading fast, jumping decks and bulkheads in a growing sphere of flame. The inner areas were now dark, the augurs there dead. The air grew furnace-hot. Metal sang with rapid heating. He smelled burning plastek and burning flesh. The smoke thickened, a black and toxic brume that would suffocate a mortal within moments.

Thothven arrived with his warriors. Besides Messinius, there were thirty-six Space Marines aboard the *Faith’s Anvil*. Thothven had nineteen at his side, including the two Librarians.

‘The perimeter is established?’ Messinius asked him. That part of the ship had tight corridors. Space Marines could only stand two abreast.

‘It is.’ Thothven’s pauldron scraped across Messinius’ chest as he moved.

‘We go in staggered pairs. Epistolaries, remain here.’

‘Maybe at least one should go first,’ said Thothven, ‘if what you fear is true, that Neverborn have gained access somehow.’

‘They are our only defence against the warp,’ said Messinius. ‘They will wait until we know exactly what we are facing, and have sorted mundane perils from the esoteric. If we lose these men, then we are all lost.’ He pulsed initial search patterns to his warriors. ‘Tillanus, GonFeest, await orders. Perimeter, be alert. Brother Artesian, you are with me. Thothven, circle round and approach from the stern.’

‘I hope you are wrong, Vitrian,’ said Thothven. ‘Neither of the Epistolaries sensed any change in the empyrean, and the Geller shields are intact.’

‘The wiles of the enemy are manifold,’ quoted Messinius. ‘Look for him always where you least expect him. I say this is no normal fire.’

‘Mission parameters?’

‘If there is a breach, it is most likely caused by an undetected witch. We find them, and destroy them.’

‘Failing that?’

‘We contain the incursion until the storm is over and we may effect translation.’

‘The alternatives?’

‘None,’ said Messinius.

Messinius shut his breathing grilles, enacting full void seal, isolating himself from the smoke. His battle plate auto-senses registered heat spikes ahead. The ship shook, a localised tremor from an explosion rather than another warp wave.

He activated his power fist, drew his plasma pistol, and strode into the burning section.

The smoke grew so black and thick that Messinius had to rely on his auto-senses. The view seemed clear enough, created from an overlay mix of heat sight and sonar, but devices did not see like the mortal eye, and sometimes the supernatural went unregistered by machine spirits. One should not rely on them, Messinius had learned, unless they were specifically made to perceive the uncanny. He therefore proceeded with caution.

There were many narrow passages in that part of the ship, the area being traversed by conduits and ducts taking power from the reactor out to all corners of the *Faith’s Anvil.* The Space Marines split up quickly. Messinius and Artesian were soon alone.

Fire did strange things on a void ship. They were spared its bizarre behaviour under zero-gravity, which lent flames the appearance of sentience even when the warp was not intruding into the materium, but they saw much else that made them slow to check for foes. Cross currents at intersections dragged the fires out into long, curling flags that bent themselves around corners. Smoke moved depending upon the air mix, sinking sometimes to the floor, where it writhed like a mat of serpents, at other times running like rivers along the ceiling. For the most part, the suppression systems were working, and the fire was choked off by jets of bright white carbon dioxide, though the low temperatures of the gas perturbed the Space Marines' visual systems further.

They passed a ruptured pipe carrying a standard atmospheric mix. Fire roared from the oxygen-rich gas like a flame thrower. Messinius' helm plate flashed a warning.

'Shut that off,' Messinius commanded. His visual inputs were ragged, the machine spirit of his battle plate struggling to make sense of the environment.

Artesian slung his boltgun and waded through the fire, the jet of it blackening his blue armour. He found a lock wheel, and twisted the supply of gas off.

Dying flames guttered along loops of cable. Decades of accumulated dust and grease meant the plastek sheaths had caught easily. Molten droplets pattered to the floor.

Artesian swung his gun back into his hands. 'I see movement ahead,' he voxed.

Messinius scanned the corridor carefully. The fires burned low, then out.

'Negative. I see nothing. Wait…'

His machine sight blurred. He switched back to true sight, leaving him with a view of the corridor that was a mess of black smoke and clouds of white fire suppressant lit by the flash of red emergency lumens. Further down the corridor past the outgassing of the suppression system, the corridor flickered with oranges and yellows of more tenacious flames.

There was something else in there too.

'Contact,' said Artesian, and he let off a short, three-round burst.

Bolt-fire boomed down the corridor, the small rockets the gun fired punching holes in the smoke as they hurtled at their targets. Artesian fired

true. His bolts exploded. Then Messinius saw.

There were things coming at them, ridiculous-looking, bodies like the large squash grown on certain agri-worlds, faces set into their chests, hugely disproportionate hands held over their heads as if their long and spindly arms could not support them any other way. They were the livid pink of cancerous organs. They gibbered and laughed, almost capering forward. Where their tubular fingers brushed the metal new fires caught, and these consumed the jets of carbon dioxide meant to extinguish them. Artesian's bolts flashed against them, exploding but somehow doing no harm, and the materium warped about them, sending nauseating, heat-haze ripples across the fabric of reality.

This Messinius perceived in a fraction of a second. The Neverborn were racing at them as fast as a flood of water.

'Down!' Messinius shouted.

Artesian dropped to one knee, flicked a switch on the side of his weapon and began shooting on full automatic. Bolts roared down the corridor. Some of these were foiled by the unnatural protection of the daemons, but the boltgun was the blessed weapon of the Adeptus Astartes, and evil could only deny the Emperor for so long.

Bolts pierced conjured flesh, and the daemons exploded in fountains of pink goo that splattered up the walls of the corridor.

Messinius had encountered these daemonspawn before. They were the horrors of Tzeentch, madness made manifest. He knew what to expect.

Artesian did not. His firing faltered as from the body of each destroyed pink daemon, two lesser, blue creatures emerged, muttering dolefully where their parent was joyous. The manic jabber of the pink horrors and the moaning of the blue horrors combined into a maddening cacophony that made Messinius' vision blur. His ears hurt, his mouth tasted of metal and spice. Spiritual annihilation was close.

He raised his plasma pistol. The whine of its coils charging cut through the discordant chatter of the daemons. Artesian's gun ran dry. He ejected his magazine and replaced it so smoothly there was barely an interruption in his shooting.

Blue horrors blew apart into rubbery fragments of flesh. From these, small fiery sprites erupted, and whirled around, setting fire to everything they touched, until the corridor was ablaze everywhere.

‘I am out of ammunition!’ Artesian yelled. It was the last thing he ever said.

The daemons of the Changer levelled their broad, laughable hands at the Space Marine. From their fingertips shot a wall of fiery pinks and blues and hideous greens. These sorcerous fires engulfed Artesian. They did not wash over and past him, but wrapped around him like living things.

Artesian screamed. The sound rapidly changed, becoming something inhuman. His armour ran like wax, his flesh warped and burst from the plates with such force they shattered. He bloomed like a hideous, cankerous flower made of flesh. In a moment, he was transformed from a mighty warrior of the Emperor to a throbbing, mewling mess of body parts that quivered, collapsed on itself, and melted into a bubbling morass that ate into the floor.

Messinius’ weapon reached full charge. He fired.

A plasma burst of brilliant blue burned into the oncoming creatures, melting their immaterial forms into steam that roiled with mocking faces. He let the gun fire on full stream, the plasma eating away at the lesser daemon forms that climbed from the remains of the first, until its spirit sang warnings of imminent overheating, and he released the trigger.

The daemons reeled back only a moment, then redoubled their charge. They filled the corridor floor to ceiling, their rolling eyes and lolling tongues those of the grotesques found in children’s stories.

He was already swinging his power fist when they reached him. The spindly arms were surprisingly strong, the claws unnaturally sharp. They pounded at him as madly as a frenzy of apes. He punched them to nothing in return, the disruptor field that shrouded his oversized robotic fist unmaking their bodies with contemptible ease.

But there were too many. Far too many.

The sheer weight of their numbers forced him back. He wrapped his fingers around a globular body and crushed it like an overripe fruit. His gun sang that it was ready to fire once more, but it was wrenched from his hand, and lost beneath the bouncing, rubbery assault of the daemons. Fire sprites crawled over his armour, seeking a way in and causing his machine spirit to scream at their touch.

A huge, knotted hand grabbed his foot and pulled with immense strength. He staggered backwards, kicked himself free, but the trick was repeated,

and in repetition, succeeded.

Messinius toppled over, as slowly and finally as a felled tree.

They shrieked in triumph and swarmed him. Messinius raised his fist to protect himself, the daemons exploding their own false flesh by throwing themselves at the weapon, such was their desperation to slay him. Their weight was awful upon his body, pressing past his ceramite into the very essence of him, cloyingly intimate, revolting his senses. One of the large pink beings straddled his chest, shoving aside its lesser kin. It had a long beak for a mouth that clattered drily an inch from his face. Messinius tried to rise, to punch it with his gauntlet, but others grabbed his limbs and held him fast.

The daemon cawed like a demented crow, raised its hands as if it meant to bludgeon him with its fists. Instead, it crooked its reed-hollow fingers, so they pointed down, and kindled pink fires within the tips.

This is how it ends, he thought. He closed his eyes, and so felt rather than saw the arrival of Epistolary Tillanus. A lifting in his soul, at the same moment painful and soothing, like a balm applied to a burn.

Suddenly, the weight of the daemons upon him was gone.

He sat with some effort. His limbs shook with exertion. The weakness would pass quickly, but at that moment he was vulnerable.

Threat indicators were minimal, so he deactivated his power fist's disruption field and used its powerful fingers to help him claw his way back up to his feet.

Tillanus stood behind him with three others.

'I told you to wait to be summoned,' said Messinius. He retrieved his pistol from the decking.

'In matters of the warp, the Librarius takes its own counsel,' said Tillanus.

Messinius surveyed the corridor. There were no daemons, nor any sign of their bodies. Natural law had reasserted itself. The corridor no longer shifted. The fires behaved as they should, their colours normal, and were going out as the suppression system doused them.

Only Artesian's body, reduced to a few fragments of armour embedded in a viscous soup, remained as evidence of the unholy horde.

'This a false reprieve,' said Tillanus. 'While the portal to the warp stays open, the enemy can bring an infinite number of his servants to test us.'

'Why do they relent?'

‘Who can guess the mind of an insane god?’ said Tillanus. He had an otherworldly air, speaking flatly. He had seen too much of what lay beyond death. Life contained no more pleasure for him. He was quiet for a moment. ‘I have located their means of ingress,’ Tillanus said. ‘We have a chance to close the way. We shut the portal, we save the ship. Ready yourself, lord lieutenant,’ he added. ‘The worst is yet to come.’

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Chapter Twenty

LIBRARIAN

AN OFFER

STILLING

Messinius’ Space Marines advanced towards the centre of the fire from all directions. Every gangway and corridor was checked. Passages too small for a man to go down were guarded. Though blazes raged in multiple compartments, walled off from the rest of the ship by mere inches of plasteel in places, on Messinius’ path the fires dwindled away, though whether because the suppression system was finally working or whether some malign will sought to lure them in, he could not say. Other units reported groups of daemons manifesting at random, and running battles erupted on several decks. Messinius kept a close eye on the battlesphere. Before long, several of his warriors had been killed. He could not trust his instruments. Unit positions were increasingly hard to verify, and on one occasion he heard men die only to see their signum runes appear on his cartolith four decks higher than their prior location, apparently unharmed.

‘The vox whispers falsehoods,’ he broadcast to his warriors. ‘My sensorium lies. Pay heed to all you see and hear.’

‘These are the followers of the Great Changer,’ said Tillanus. ‘The father of deception.’

‘Aye,’ Messinius said. ‘I have encountered these Neverborn before.’

‘Do not let your experience grant you false confidence, my lord,’ Tillanus said. ‘I fear that whichever entity orchestrates this assault is drawing us in.’

‘Hypotheticals?’ Messinius asked.

‘You are their target. You have the primarch’s affection. In their realm, you are a rare sort of talisman for that reason alone.’

Messinius half turned so he could look at Tillanus directly.

‘You suggest I turn back?’

‘Never, my lord.’

Messinius made a noise of approval at this reply. ‘If it is arrogant enough to let me approach, then I do not fear it.’

They reached an area where the fires had retreated, though the soot-black walls still radiated a dangerous heat, and twisted pieces of wreckage gave off pale smoke. Biolumes lit the corridors. All were non-functional. The medium that sustained the luminescent organisms had boiled off, the glass shattered, and the lights were dead.

‘Stablights,’ Messinius commanded. Sharp cones of pure white light snapped on, piercing the gloom only where the light fell, and a heavy darkness, granular as the soot coating the walls and ceiling, pressed in.

The ship plunged and rolled, the storm still raging beyond the whisper-thin protection of the Geller field. Messinius tried to contact the command deck and the Navigator’s manse, but got only static laced with unintelligible speech and wild laughter. He tried several other stations in the ship, then the Space Marines manning the cordon around the incursion zone to similar result. No matter what he tried, he heard only the same disturbing static, and his apprehension of the mission became wholly fragmented.

Not long after, Messinius caught a bitter, cloying scent. He should have smelled nothing through his void-sealed armour.

‘Slowly,’ he said. At his side, Tellanus whispered verses to focus his mind. His eye-lenses shone as he drew on his gifts, and the grooves in his force sword glimmered with power. The light was unpleasant to look at.

The corridors altered. They widened, then split. They still seemed mundane, still bore the patterns of Imperial construction, but the cartolith hovering at the edge of his vision bore no resemblance to what he saw before him. The corridor spiralled, as if a giant had seized both ends and twisted them sharply in his hands.

‘Lord lieutenant, are you seeing this?’ Thothven voxed him. According to Messinius’ armour he was close by, approaching from ahead.

‘The touch of the warp is strong here,’ Messinius said.

‘I have movement ahead. Uncertain readings. Moving in.’

‘Do not engage!’ Tillanus warned, and raised his hand. Its movements trailed corposant in the air. The way back shimmered, and Messinius caught sight of stablights moving towards them.

‘Lord lieutenant? Is that you? My cartolith has you opposite us.’

‘Deception?’

‘No, it is them,’ said Tillanus.

Messinius checked his cartolith. It showed Thothven’s group, now numbering six, moving away from him in the opposite direction, yet here he was approaching. Space Marines manoeuvred in the narrow corridor to allow Messinius forward to speak to Thothven.

‘This makes no sense,’ said Thothven.

‘Our maps are useless,’ said Messinius. ‘We stand upon the threshold of madness.’ He dismissed his cartolith. ‘It is possible we are no longer on the ship. Can you find our way to the centre, Epistolary?’

‘Yes, my lord. We must rip out this cancer from the body of the ship. It is this way.’ Tillanus went forward, his helm lenses glowing even more strongly with ghost light.

A period akin to a fever dream followed. It had been a century since Messinius had last been ill, but he remembered a time before his apotheosis, lying in his room on Sabatine, watched over by his anxious mother, when the world of sense had receded, and became something like the nightmare he faced on the ship. The floors and walls switched places somehow. Strange sounds roared from the depths, and often the sound of giggling came suddenly from the air beside their heads, fraying even transhuman nerves. The ship was rolled constantly, making them rock upon their heels, and slowing their progress. Messinius had never known a warp storm so bad. Silently, he beseeched the Emperor that they should pass through to the other side alive.

‘Bodies,’ Thothven voxed. He lifted a burned swatch of heat-resistant fabric from fire-shrivelled limbs. ‘Ignis crew, if this uniform does not lie.’

Messinius pushed past him. ‘There are others.’ He stopped by three corpses pathetically tangled in one another. He scanned them with his

sensorium and read nothing, but he assumed them to be the grease gang. They were burned to little more than charcoal sculptures, their limbs drawn in tight by ligaments shrivelled by the heat, teeth shockingly white in black skulls that seemed too big for their shrunken bodies. They would not be easy to pry apart from one another.

Messinius looked up. ‘We are close.’

They passed a room that seemed to open up onto a burning forest, each tree blazing with vibrant hues of purple. The trees deliriously screamed one word over and over again.

‘Home home home home home home home…’

The corridor ended in a wall of blackness that had a physical presence, so solid they could not see beyond it. Tillanus stopped at the threshold, and turned back.

‘Lord lieu…’ he began, before he vanished with a bright flash.

Bolt rifles came up to fire.

‘Hold,’ said Messinius. ‘Stay here. If it is me this thing wants, then there is no point you following.’

‘We cannot risk you. We should consider withdrawing,’ Thothven said.

‘If I do not risk myself, we are lost,’ said Messinius. ‘This way there is a small chance we shall survive.’

He did not wait for further objections, but walked into the darkness, and passed beyond.

He was caught between moments for an infinity that was somehow discrete from the normal run of things. He had felt this before, when on ships crossing the veil from materium to immaterium, or when walking through the curtains of a void shield; a sense of dislocation not just from the dimensions of space and time, but also from himself, as if he as Messinius, eternity itself, and whatever truly formed the core of his eternal being were aspects of each other, and he only understood when they were forced apart and into confrontation. Revelation hit him with the force of a thunderbolt. The shape he had worn all his life was an illusion. Though these moments went on forever, they never lasted.

He must have closed his eyes. When he opened them, he was elsewhere.

He looked down from a bare mountain slope upon plunging valleys full of forests, and beyond them onto rolling hills that turned suddenly into wide

plains divided into merciless squares of cultivation, each tended by huge harvesters. An agri-world.

There was a single, stunted tree a few yards away, its roots like arthritic fingers clamped so hard around a stone it had split it in two. As he regarded it, it burst into flame, and a voice issued forth.

'Greetings, Vitrian Messinius of Sabatine, White Consul, Lord of Space Marines.'

'So we come to it,' said Messinius. 'What great fate will you offer as my temptation, daemon? Speak it so I may end you.'

The tree burned without burning. The voice laughed.

'So wise and powerful you are by your race's measure, so feeble by any other.'

'If you expect me to wonder, to ask where I am, to beg for release, I shall not, for the Emperor is my master, and He guides my hand.'

Messinius raised his plasma gun and squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened. He called upon the weapon's machine spirit through his neural links, but it was silent.

'Only minds that I permit may operate here, Vitrian Messinius. Be glad, for I could have destroyed you, and might yet.'

'If your goal is to attempt to turn me, then do not bother to try. I am resolute. I will sacrifice my soul if it furthers the goals of the Emperor and the preservation of mankind.'

'Curious that His worshippers assume always that is His goal, when what proof do you have?'

'There is no need for proof, when one has faith.'

'The belief of the naive. I expected more. Perhaps you have enough intelligence to heed me, Space Marine, when I say I come with an offer, and a warning.'

'I will have neither!' Messinius took a step towards the tree. His power armour's power plant was inactive, and without the boost it gave to his limbs, moving was like trying to wade through sand. He grunted, and lifted his other foot, and swung it forward, fighting against the drag of the armour wanting to tip him backwards. Leaden boots threatened his footing on the steep slope. He steadied himself, and as he approached the tree, he lifted his power fist. With fibre bundles inactive, it weighed as much as a world.

‘Listen to me. Change opposes decay. All are in play. The universe reaches a point of renewal. You may serve the true masters of being or you may perish and suffer until the end of time. The choice is yours.’

Messinius swung his fist like a club, battering at the rock and the roots by main force alone. Bark ripped off, showing smooth green wood beneath. The sharp scent of sap filled his nostrils.

‘I choose service. I choose the Emperor of Mankind.’

He struck again. A root ripped free. The fire wavered. The smell of charred wood joined that of sap. The flames bit. The tree was beginning to burn.

‘That is a false choice. Like it or not, you are a part of the great game. You are and always shall be a pawn. Ask yourself whose gambit you will support’.

‘I am no one’s pawn!’ Messinius slammed the unpowered fist into the stone, shattering it. The listing tree gave off a shower of sparks that rose in a cloud to the sky.

‘Your Chapter is dead. Your friends are gone. All you have are your principles, and they will be as dust in your mouth. You will change your mind when the time comes. Look for me, at the critical moment. Look for me, and oppose a mutual foe. Look for me!’

Messinius grabbed the stunted tree around its trunk, ripped it free, and cast it down. It gave off a further burst of sparks, and tumbled down the mountainside aflame.

‘I defy you, by the Emperor of Terra, I defy you!’

You do not have the power to escape. You are deep in the web. You are not free. You cannot be. The voice was in his head now, so loud Messinius screamed with the pain of it. ***You will know this truth. It is the future, and the future cannot be resisted.***

Feeling like his brain might burst, Messinius pitched forward, and struck his face on the stone, and saw then the worn hatching of ancient deck plating instead.

‘My lord?’

Messinius looked up into the helm mask of Thothven. He was back on the ship. The fires were out. He didn’t need to look. His helm vents had opened and he could smell the stink of smoke lessening as recyc systems scrubbed the air clean.

The ship was running smoothly. The jolting had stopped. They were through the storm. The Navigators must have managed an egress after all.

He got up. His armour reactor restarted without protest, its smooth hum permeating his body. Once more, its machineries lent him their strength.

He was looking into a dormitory room. It was badly burned and full of the steaming remains of human beings, heaped atop one another.

‘My lord?’ Thothven asked.

Messinius did not respond, but went within the room, turning sideways so that he might pass through the narrow door. He crushed the bodies, that was unavoidable.

There was one man sat in the centre of the dormitory. He was burned beyond recognition like the rest, though he differed in other respects. He was sat upright cross-legged, in a repose of peace, and across his knees was a single branch of fresh wood. To its twigs clung two dozen bright yellow leaves.

Messinius turned away from it in disgust.

‘Burn that. Burn them all. Have the ashes blessed and ejected into the void.’

Thothven tilted his head in question. ‘Vitrian, we are not in the void.’

That did surprise him. ‘Then why do we move with so little difficulty?’

‘I do not know,’ said Thothven. ‘But we have not translated. We ply the warp still.’

Messinius checked his vox. It worked as it should. He hailed the Navigatorial manse, and this time was received by Lord Ulice Balevolio, the senior member of their triad.

‘Lord lieutenant. I assume you wish to know why our progress is so smooth?’ He sounded jubilant.

‘That is so.’

‘We approach Bane’s Landing, and the Nephilim Anomaly. I assume this is the stilling, my lord, the technology of the xenos smothering the turmoil in the warp. I have heard of its effects from other Navigators, but did not believe that it would be so pronounced. Remarkable. The warp is as calm as a mountain lake. I have read in our oldest records of times when the warp could be so, but I never thought to see this myself.’

‘Give me a time of arrival.’

‘A day, at most. Perhaps less. We move swiftly, as much as such reckoning has any meaning in the empyrean, and I predict we will be early.’

Messinius was silent a moment. ‘Inform me six hours before we leave the warp. I shall prepare myself to meet the primarch.’

Messinius addressed his warriors.

‘Gather your men, Thothven. You shall accompany me. Clean yourselves up. I will not go before Guilliman like a king of beggars.’

‘What happened to you?’ Thothven asked. ‘You vanished, like Tillanus.’

‘Where is he?’

‘He did not come back. What happened?’

Messinius looked at him for a long, long moment. He almost related what he had seen. Almost.

‘Ready your men, Thothven,’ he repeated, and left before any more questions could be asked of him.

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Chapter Twenty-One

A PROPOSITION FOR CAWL

BANE'S LANDING

HALF-MAN

Fleet Primus was already well into its night cycle before Belisarius Cawl agreed to receive Archmagos-Emmisarius Leeta Unter Sobel-Phi. He made her wait, though, hours in the sole orbital belonging to Bane's Landing, staring impotently out of its viewing arcade, her small flock of servo-skulls bobbing around her.

The Emmisarius was not accustomed to waiting. Internally she seethed with such annoyance she was forced to isolate her sentiment circuits. She didn't like cutting off her feelings. They came back redoubled and brought with them the fuzzy headache of throughput overload, but this time it was necessary. She had to remain calm. The meeting with Cawl was too important to allow herself to enjoy anger.

She thought these things as she gazed out into the dark. The armaglass windows reflected her modified face perfectly, but her own reflection did not interest her. She looked through it, to the ships.

Fleet Primus gathered in unimaginable numbers around Bane's Landing; hundreds upon hundreds of warships, thousands of support vessels, so many their lights filled the void in every direction. Constellations of false stars

blazed wherever she looked. She thought there were perhaps more people in space around the world than upon it at that moment. The population of Bane's Landing was small. Upon the nightside currently presented to the orbital there were few city lights. They looked oddly isolated surrounded by the swarms of artificial stars crowding the world's orbit.

Where it was night in one place, it was day in another. The Great Work was always in balance, according to the will of its divine architect, the Machine God. She wondered what the people of Bane's Landing thought as they looked heavenward, and saw the might of the Imperium gathered there.

In a few hours, dawn would arrive to her right. Above and below the axial points of the world, there was more light, photons scattered by the last gasps of the world's gas envelope. She calculated the density of the blend zone: quite high, for a world of this size, and therefore indicative of gradual atmosphere loss. All worlds gasped out their air, every one was giving a billion-year death gasp, but some expired quicker than others. Holy Mars itself had lost its envelope well before Terra did. All part of the Great Work. Venus, Mars and Terra, the three pieces in the opening puzzle given to mankind by their watchful god. Terra was just right, Mars too cold and airless, Venus too hot and choking. All would become the domiciles of humankind, the first steps on the species' road to dominance. Many millions of such steps had been taken since then, leading them to places like this. This meeting with Cawl was another step, she thought. The Machine God had His plan, and if she must wait, so be it.

The planet was a soft ball. Light did not scatter in the void. The void was binary: either darkness or light, hard lines of black and pitiless glaring light. Living worlds eliminated that. They allowed for nuance. Bane's Landing glowed with vitality. An oasis in the killing black.

<Mental shunt active. Redundant thought process. Reroute synaptic cascades.>

A cylindrical central consciousness capacitor bedded deep in the meat of her brain refocused her thoughts for her. She resisted for a moment before permitting it to do its work. She was getting distracted.

Her interest in Bane's Landing and the fleet it hosted abruptly shut off. She turned away from the view. No more information to be extracted. She felt an emotionless relief to be free of introspection.

A short while later, the ready lumen on the door at the far end of the corridor turned from red to green. A voice blared security codes. There were soldiers outside. The orbital was modest, a diplomatic outpost for hosting visiting off-worlders, not a battle station, but its staff and machine spirits were making a play of belligerence. A pointless show, she thought; a modest force would overrun the place in an hour. So much of what humans did was for appearances' sake. More distractions from the path of true knowledge.

Sobel-Phi straightened her robe, set her servo-flock at a wide, imposing displacement, and arranged her mechadendrites into a pattern intended to be welcoming as well as intimidating. She had heard a lot about Belisarius Cawl, much of it contradictory. Cawl was either a hero or a heretek. She had been eager to see which label fit best. She had, in fact, been a little nervous. Another good reason to keep her emotional responses locked away.

The door opened. It was not the great archmagos who emerged. Later, when the inviolable digital doors that sealed away her feelings were opened, she would be disappointed.

In Cawl's place was a slender magos. At first glance he appeared to be minimally augmented, but as he walked towards her she saw that he was mostly machine, and he was not a magos. His robes were plain red, with a white cog-tooth pattern around the hood. There were no sigils of rank or specialisation.

'Greetings,' said the man. 'I am afraid the archmagos could not attend to you himself, and sent me in his stead. I apologise if this causes any offence.'

He had an open, human face. Little if anything else of him was made of flesh.

'Who are you?' she demanded. She looked him up and down, and saw he wasn't even a man. 'What are you?'

The being smiled apologetically.

'I am Qvo-87, the Prime Conduit's helpmeet, and I am authorised to speak on his behalf. I trust that will be sufficient?'

Sobel-Phi looked at him for a long time. She performed close-range scans upon him, an offensive approach without asking permission, but she had the

intuition he would not object. He smiled vacantly while she played her auspexes through his body.

‘You’re a construct,’ she said.

‘I am,’ he agreed.

‘You seem fully autonomous,’ she said. The implications worried her, even with her emotional buffers firmly clamped in place.

His smile became a little apologetic. ‘I am not. I appear so. Sometimes. In truth, I am not entirely sure what I am, but I am not an abominable intelligence, as some have accused me of being. I am, I suppose, a particularly sophisticated sort of servitor.’

‘You match no classification system,’ she said. She regretted not having her weapons. That had been a stipulation of the meeting. She could see why. She knew plenty of magi who would have blasted this heretical creation to pieces on sight. She wasn’t defenceless because she wasn’t a fool. She was from Mars, where intrigues ran bloody. Three of her servo-skulls had concealed weaponry. She primed them now, just in case.

Qvo shrugged. ‘I don’t. I know. From another point of view, I am a storage system for engrams retrieved from a certain Friedisch Adum Silip Qvo,’ he added helpfully.

‘An immortality engine?’

‘I am firmly in a grey area. But I don’t believe I am heretekal,’ he said. ‘My cognitive capabilities are generated from human brain tissue. My memories, personality and all that are genuine. They’re just not mine. The Lord Cawl has argued for my acceptability within the tenets of the Cult lore many times. If you find me offensive, I understand, and will withdraw.’

‘Then the meeting will be over.’

‘It will. I am to speak with you. If you do not wish to speak to me, then Lord Cawl will say the meeting was dissolved at your insistence. I can warn you of that, at least.’

‘So there is no other intermediary I could converse with.’

Qvo gave another of his apologetic smiles. It was exactly the same as the first, eerily so, identical as a plaster cast.

‘My Lord Cawl keeps his intimates to a manageable number. He trusts few people completely. There is Primus, but I suspect you would like him even less.’

‘This is a very delicate matter.’

Qvo nodded. ‘I know, but it is me, or it is nobody.’ He raised a mechanical hand and waved it. There was a subtle change to the noospheric vibrations in the gallery. ‘There is a privacy field in operation. Please speak freely.’

She stared at him, saying nothing.

‘Then allow me to do so. You are here on behalf of the Omnissian sect to ask if Belisarius Cawl would consider putting himself forward for the candidacy of Fabricator General of Mars.’

‘I am here on behalf of the Synod of Mars,’ she corrected.

‘That is not strictly accurate,’ said Qvo. ‘You are here on behalf of a faction within the Synod of Mars which is not pleased with the performance of the new Fabricator General. I shall save your time, and inform you that Belisarius Cawl does not have, never has had, and never will have any interest whatsoever in assuming high office.’

‘If you are correct in your surmising here, and we shall pretend as a game of theory that is so, we are not discussing high office, we are discussing the highest of offices,’ said Sobel-Phi. ‘The overlordship of the Empire of Mars.’

‘Firstly, the highest office is the least attractive high office of all,’ said Qvo gently. ‘Secondly, there is no Empire of Mars, only a collection of overlapping fiefs and spheres of interests, which is why the Omnissiah of the Imperium of Man sits on Terra, and not Olympus Mons. Those factions who see the Adeptus Mechanicus as capable of becoming a force unified enough to challenge the hegemony of Terra are sorely mistaken.’

‘You are very confident in assigning me opinions.’

‘Cawl has predetermined much of your conversation in advance. He finds it saves time.’

‘He is arrogant.’

‘He is Belisarius Cawl,’ said Qvo, as if that excused everything.

Sobel-Phi placed her hands over where her stomach had once been. She enjoyed eating, so had replaced much of her alimentary system with hyper-efficient digestion bladders rather than discarding it entirely. The energy gained that way was minimal, but the pleasure she derived was worth the effort.

‘Listen to me. The Cult of the Machine is disunited. Someone like your master could bring unity to our people. He could concentrate our power,

and help us shrug off the dead hand of Terra. We would reign supreme as the ultimate expression of humanity, not a beggared offshoot.’

‘Interesting,’ said Qvo, who said it because Cawl often said it himself. ‘When you say unity, you mean the unification of the factions that support Cawl. Those that see him as a divine agent, or as a genius, or as a messianic polymath. I hear there are even some who think he is the Omnissiah himself.’

‘Ridiculous.’

‘Only as ridiculous as some of your other assertions. Your unity would lead to war between the forges of the Cult. The Red Planet would run with the blood of our people, and that would be only the start of it, for after that there would be war with Terra, and civil war throughout the Imperium.’

‘There would be no war. There would be renegotiation.’

‘There would be war. After Oud Oudia Raskian perished, the new Fabricator General was chosen with perfect respect to the lore. You are preaching rebellion. Cawl will have no part in these schemes.’

Sobel-Phi took a step closer. Qvo held his ground, his expression still infuriatingly mild. ‘Cawl shirks his responsibilities. He could be the one who reinvigorates all of our species, the one to lead us to full comprehension, yet he refuses. He is selfish.’

‘He is wise,’ said Qvo. ‘What do you think the regent would say to this? Or the rest of the Cult who do not happen to share your convictions?’

Sobel-Phi allowed herself to feel amusement. ‘Are you threatening me? I have many allies. I could bring unwelcome attention upon your master.’

‘Which is why there will be no message sent. Cawl thanks you for your offer, but he has no interest in the intrigues of the Red Planet. He is a scientist. He intends to save humanity, and he cannot do that if he is shackled to your schemes.’ He paused. ‘If I may deviate from the instructions Cawl pressed upon me, and share with you a confidence?’

‘Go ahead,’ said Sobel-Phi.

‘Cawl will never take the kind of power you offer. It would imprison him. You seek to use his genius to your own ends. You do not wish him to rule. You wish to rule through him. He is nobody’s figurehead. He treads his own route to enlightenment, and he does so in the full view of the Machine God, Omnissiah and Motive Force. Cawl has no need for your plots. He is

divinely mandated. The Emperor is the Omnissiah. Cawl has His trust. They knew each other.’

‘Knew a part of him, maybe. Cawl is as much an abomination as you are,’ said Sobel-Phi.

‘I see,’ said Qvo. He took a step back. ‘If we have reached the point of insults, then I judge this interview over. Thank you for your time. The answer is no, and shall remain so.’

Qvo walked away from Sobel-Phi. He was slight, a feeble facsimile of a man. A blasphemy, she thought.

‘Qvo!’ she shouted after him.

Qvo stopped, and shuffled around to face her.

‘Does your master know how Oud Oudia Raskian died, or why?’

‘No,’ said Qvo.

‘Very few know. Those that learn this truth are in grave danger. Here.’

She sent forward one of her skulls.

‘This data carrier was sent only to be read by Cawl himself. He refuses to see me. Very well. He shall not have the bounty of information I bring.’

A neural impulse had the skull drop to the floor. The bone shattered on the stone. The exposed mechanism burst into flames.

‘Tell him from me that there are things he does not know, and that he cannot conceive of, and that he should know. The time of the Emperor is coming to an end. War is coming to the Imperium whatever he does.’

‘War is ever-present.’

‘Civil war,’ she said, her tone hard. She was triumphant, the gloating of a woman who wishes the worst to happen, if only to prove her point. ‘Will your master sit back while the sons and daughters of mankind fall upon one another? Ask Cawl to think on his future. Ask him to take a side before history decides for him. At least then, he will have a choice.’ She gathered her remaining servo-skulls to her. ‘When he wishes to know what I would freely tell him, bid him come to me. I will say nothing until I have his ear. I have nothing more to say to you.’

She left the strange half-man wondering what news she might have, and what price would be worth paying for it.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

SICARIUS AND MESSINIUS

SONS OF THE PRIMARCHS

NEW DUTIES

A pair of Adeptus Custodes barred the way to Guilliman’s librarium with crossed spears. They were faceless giants in gold, their tall, conical helms making them seem even more inhuman. Born of the same science as Messinius, they were unknowable to him for all their kinship. When he approached, they looked over his head as if he were not there.

Instead, members of the Victrix Guard in immaculate armour moved to meet him. They should have been more relatable, but they were among the mightiest heroes in all the Imperium, and their angled, wing-adorned faceplates judged all who came to the primarch’s inner sanctum with the disdain of raptors.

Messinius had twenty men with him. They stood to attention in four ranks of five at a respectful distance. Their armour was the same blue as that of the Victrix Guard, and just as burnished. It reflected every glance of light from the candles and lumens, so clean and pure the battle plate seemed to be carved from gemstones.

This reunion with the regent should have been a homecoming of sorts, yet Messinius was tense.

‘I have an appointment to speak with the lord regent,’ he said.

‘Wait here,’ was the only response he got. He returned to his men, and his nerves grew tauter.

Silence seemed to spill from the librarium’s closed doors into the antechamber. The Custodians and Victrix Guard did not move or speak. His men were similarly silent. The noise of the ship’s systems was a distant hum under the metal, as unobtrusive as the shushing of his own heart. The near-imperceptible noise of power packs working at low output whined like biting insects.

He found it oppressive.

He waited.

The Custodians stood suddenly to attention, the blades of their guardian spears ringing off each other as they uncrossed. The doors yawned inward. A Space Marine Messinius knew well came out.

‘Captain Sicarius,’ Messinius said.

Sicarius extended his arm in friendship, though throughout their short conversation his other hand remained on the hilt of his sword.

‘My brother.’

They clasped arms, then Messinius drew the Ultramarine forward into a brief embrace.

‘I was gladdened to hear you had returned from the warp. It was a sad day when we lost you. Heroes like you are sorely needed.’

‘It was a long road back to Terra,’ Sicarius said, in a tone of voice that made Messinius look at him closely. Sicarius sounded different. He supposed that should not be surprising, considering Sicarius’ adventures. On the way to deliver Primaris material to the Ultramarines, his ship had been attacked by daemonkind while in the warp. He had lost many of his men. By some miracle they had eventually emerged from the warp, but such an experience would tax any man, Adeptus Astartes or no. Sicarius had become even more brutal, his manner distant.

‘I heard you acquitted yourself well, and saved a lost world into the bargain.’

Sicarius had never been an ebullient man, but this quietness was new. ‘A warrior finds his duty before him, wherever he goes. I made my way back to Macragge. There, I found the position of Second Company captain had

been awarded to my brother Acheran, so I returned to seek guidance from the primarch. I was still lost. Now you see me as I am, lost no more.'

'Captain of the Victrix Guard, no less. There are few higher honours.'

This elicited the ghost of a smile from the Ultramarine.

'There are no higher honours. As a man who served the primarch directly, you should know that. What brings you here?'

'As you said, a warrior finds his duty before him. A summons from the old man himself.'

Sicarius put his hand on Messinius' pauldron. 'Then you too will receive high honour. He regards you well, Vitrian, and he should.'

Guilliman's latest equerry came out of the librarium. He was unarmoured, and wore a robe with an unfamiliar badge. So many Chapters had been founded since the crusade had begun it was impossible to keep track of them all. He went bareheaded, his scalp shaved down to his skin, which was a rich, reddish brown. His features bore the stamp of Rogal Dorn.

'The Imperial Regent will see you now, lord lieutenant. He bids me apologise for the wait.'

Messinius was struck by the emptiness of the librarium. Guilliman travelled everywhere with a great number of books in all mediums. Now, the librarium's high shelves were empty. A few crates stood with their hinged lids open, ready to receive the last documents laid out upon the primarch's desk. Without the muffling quality of paper, every sound was greatly amplified.

The equerry escorted him to the librarium's centre, a large space where Guilliman sat on a heavily reinforced chair. He had been unable to remove his armour since his resurrection, and the combined weight of his body and battle plate was considerable. All furniture he used had to be heavily reinforced. Despite the difficulties wearing the armour presented, still he managed to write hundreds of documents a day. He was writing then, as Messinius approached him, one hand delicately manipulating an autoquill, the other resting on a touch-active screen. The fingers were thick in their gauntlets, not dextrous, but Guilliman managed both instruments with an ease Messinius did not believe he could match himself with his armour off. The paperwork was but one of the myriad things Guilliman must attend to. If Messinius' own duties as lord lieutenant and commander of Battle Group

Jovian had seemed onerous, they were nothing compared to the burdens borne by the last loyal son.

‘I shall fetch refreshments,’ the equerry said to Messinius. ‘It will be good for him to stop working for a while.’ He departed by a side door, leaving Messinius alone with the primarch. Guilliman continued to work.

‘I am sorry, Vitrian,’ he said without looking up. ‘I shall be done with this in a moment. Please, take a seat.’

There was a single chair on Messinius’ side of the table fashioned for a Space Marine wearing armour. Messinius did not take it immediately. It had only been a few years since they had last met, but Guilliman looked older. Primarchs were supposedly immortal. They had called him the ‘Old Man’ during the Terran Crusade as a mark of affection, but seeing the faint purple smudges under the primarch’s eyes, the looser skin on his cheeks, the nickname made Messinius uncomfortable. Guilliman was a leader, a lord, a saviour, but the weight of government had changed him, the incomprehensible mass of it settling around him like a glacier encroaching on a pinnacle of rock, the ice accentuating the stone in the landscape before engulfing it and crushing it to sand.

Memories of the journey to Terra, the early parts of the Indomitus Crusade, his efforts to keep the primarch from harm, came to Messinius forcefully. The primarch was alone. Messinius wished to be a friend. It was presumptuous, dangerous maybe, to think that he could be anything more than a loyal servant. Roboute Guilliman was a son of the Emperor, the living god of humanity. What could Guilliman want from someone like Messinius? What could he possibly offer?

Guilliman looked up from his work.

‘Vitrian, is everything well with you? Please, approach, and sit as I asked,’ he said. Despite all he had to do, the evidence of which was laid out before him on the table, Guilliman’s concern was genuine. Messinius was humbled by it, then ashamed he had added to his gene-father’s burden.

‘I am sorry, my lord, it has been a long time since we met. I am struck by memory.’

‘And I neglect my manners,’ Guilliman said. He set down his quill. ‘Come. Let me put my distractions aside and give you my full attention.’

‘I understand your burdens,’ Messinius said. ‘I shall not stay long.’

Guilliman kept his eyes fixed on the Space Marine as he approached the table. Messinius remembered well the power of that regard, how it burned into him, calling into him a feeling both joyous and terrifying. His skin prickled at experiencing it again.

‘Nonsense,’ said Guilliman. ‘I shall make time for you. I heard Tanus. He wants me to rest more. He fusses, but perhaps he is right. I could do with a pause from my labours. It is good to see you again, my son.’

With a gentle tap the primarch deactivated the data-slate and pushed it aside. Reports from every part of the Imperium covered the table: maps, lists of names in a script almost too small to read, system charts, books of heraldry, all annotated in Guilliman’s neat hand.

‘What happened to your librarium, my lord?’ Messinius asked.

‘I have much to discuss with you, lord lieutenant. Not all of it of a pleasant nature, and some of it concerns you. So let us begin with an answer to your question. That at least is good news.’

Guilliman leaned back a little, as much as the armour would allow. Space Marines were bred to wear armour for long periods, months if need be, but Messinius could all too easily imagine the discomfort of being trapped in it.

‘The *Macragge’s Honour* was recovered from the Red Corsairs some time ago. It has been cleansed and refitted, and now it is ready. I shall take it again as my flagship once this business here is dealt with. It is a good omen. My possessions have been sent on ahead of me. That is why my librarium is empty.’ He looked around the empty room. Every sound the two of them made was reflected crisply back at them. ‘The *Dawn of Fire* shall continue in service. It has been a good ship to me, but the *Macragge’s Honour* is a symbol of continuity with the old Imperium as the Emperor dreamed it.’

‘It is also a more powerful ship.’

Guilliman smiled, as if acknowledging that even a primarch was not immune to the attraction of a more potent weapon. ‘Yes. It is, and it has many memories for me. It was my home for a long time.’

‘It is right that you should reclaim it.’

‘That it is.’

‘What of this bad news, lord? Perhaps we might deal with that? I do not wish to be kept in suspense.’

Guilliman began to speak, but closed his mouth when the door opened and Tanus returned with a tray. On it were two fine glasses sized for

transhumans and a tall carafe of purple wine. No servants accompanied him. He set the tray down on a small side table, poured for the two lords, then left with a small bow.

Guilliman leaned over to take his glass. It took effort to be so delicate. The stem of the glass caught between armoured fingers, and he lifted it carefully to take a small sip. ‘Very well. I have had word of the White Consuls.’

Messinius tensed.

‘I am sorry, Messinius, none of your brothers survived the fall of Sabatine, so far as I can tell. The majority of your Chapter were fighting around the Cadian Gate when Abaddon attacked, and it appears most of them were killed in the course of their duties. A handful escaped. I have the whereabouts of fifteen of them. There may be more.’ Guilliman pushed a parchment towards Messinius. ‘This information is probably out of date. I shall secure more recent intelligence as soon as I can. I am sorry.’

Messinius took up the sheet. He scanned the names. He knew them all, of course; one thousand people was no great number.

‘There is only one other captain listed here. Borsellius. Are there no other officers?’

‘You and he are the last.’

‘The Chapter Masters?’

‘Both missing, presumed dead. The fleet is destroyed. I am sorry, Messinius. You have waited a long time for this information. It is ill that tidings could not be better.’

‘What about our domain? We watched over a sector.’

‘Sabatine has been infected by bioweapons deployed by the Death Guard, some of a sorcerous nature, and is irredeemably contaminated. Several other worlds guarded by your brothers were attacked, most survived. Sabatine is quarantined.’

‘Then my Chapter is extinct.’

‘Fifteen of your brothers live. You live. Chapters have been reduced to similar numbers before and have risen from the ashes. Yours shall too.’

‘Then I beg your leave to go back to Sabatine, my lord. I should begin to rebuild.’

‘I am afraid I cannot let you do that, my son,’ said Guilliman. ‘I need you here. All remaining Unnumbered Sons of my line currently under your command will be gifted to you as new members of the Chapter. They shall

begin the Chapter's rebirth. You will retain your rank and position as lord lieutenant of Fleet Tertius.'

'What of the Chapter Master?'

'I am elevating Captain Borsellius. He may choose a second master according to your traditions, or not. The choice will be his.'

Messinius drank his wine. 'Borsellius is a good man. These are kingly gifts, my lord. I thank you.'

Guilliman laughed. 'You speak of kings. My foster father was a king. My so-called father an Emperor. Their ways are not mine. I do this for the Imperium, not for you, or for myself.'

'A figure of speech, I meant no offence.'

'No need for that. I am attempting levity. That happens occasionally.' The primarch became serious again. 'But you will not be returning to Sabatine. I shall be making a gift to the Chapter of several strike cruisers. In time, you will be furnished with a battle-barge.'

'A fleet-based Chapter? The White Consuls have always been a settled brotherhood.'

'You may be again, but it is clear that Sabatine will not be reclaimed. You are far from home, and I will have need of your warriors. We will speak of that later,' said Guilliman. 'Be content that your Chapter is saved. Now we must discuss other matters.'

Messinius felt numb. Some losses were too large to process. His entire Chapter, gone. It was as he feared, but there had always been hope. 'Yes, my lord.'

'The Unnumbered Sons. Their time is over. My original plan was to maintain them in large formations until Imperium Sanctus was secure, but following the Hexarchy Coup on Terra several years ago, it became clear to me that I could not retain armies such as these without courting political disaster. I have been working to disperse them to the model I laid out in the Codex Astartes. The numbers of unassigned warriors in each fleet are much smaller than previously, but still numerous enough to pose significant political problems. I am not trusted entirely on Terra, the situation in the Senatorum Imperialis remains delicate. The longer I maintain these so-called pseudo-Legions, the harder it is to maintain the impression that I have no designs on the Throne. I am not a new warmaster in the making, I swear to you, Messinius, but convincing others of that is impossible while it

appears I am breaking my own ban on the Legions.’ He frowned a little, put his glass on the table. Despite its size it seemed too dainty to survive his grip. ‘Armies of Space Marines are a most useful military tool. I had hoped that accelerated redeployment into new Chapters and induction of Primaris warriors by existing Chapters would help allay some of those fears, but it has not worked. For many vested interests the Ultima Founding is not proceeding fast enough. So I am going to break up the last of the Unnumbered Sons.’

‘That makes sense,’ said Messinius. ‘I have come across worries about the brotherhoods myself. It would be well received on Terra.’

‘Well received, but militarily disadvantageous,’ said Guilliman.

‘When will you give the final decree?’

‘Exactly? I do not know. I am gambling here, Vitrian, and I do not like to gamble. Imperium Sanctus is far from saved, but I cannot tarry too long. All messages from Nihilus tell of a dire situation on the far side of the Rift. It will be damaging if the hope raised by hearing Nihilus stands is broken by its fall. If I disband the Unnumbered Sons too soon then my work in Sanctus will be much harder. I will be delayed, and I will not be able to move with sufficient speed to counteract the enemy’s advances on the far side of the Great Rift. If I leave the Unnumbered Sons intact too long, and I begin to believe I have already done so, then the political repercussions will be unconscionable. I foresaw the potential problems on Terra. Then I had little choice, and I cannot afford to use the heavy hand again. Only fear kept more of the lesser lords from throwing their lot in with the rebellious members of the High Twelve. That is no way to run an empire, or to win a war.’

‘Give the order, my lord, and the remaining Greyshields in Fleet Tertius will be disbanded immediately.’

‘Not quite yet, I judge. I will need them in the coming months. In most places, we have made significant gains against the enemy. The way to Terra is guarded well by Fleet Secundus. The Nachmund Gauntlet is covered by the Sanctus Wall, the Anaxian Line has stabilised the area south of the Eye. We have put an end to the Word Bearers’ attempts to destabilise the Segmentum Solar. But there is still much to do before I can finalise my plans for the crossing into Nihilus.’

He paused to drink his wine. His ceramite made a gritty rasp on the glass, and Messinius feared once more it would break. It was as if he held the Imperium in his hands.

‘But although I intend to retain them for a while, it will not be in their current form. Long ago, the divisions between the sons of my brothers helped fuel Horus’ rebellion. By the time he turned on the Emperor, suspicions between each Legion were already well established. Horus exploited this mistrust. I do not wish this to occur again. I wish you and the other lords lieutenant to mix the remaining formations. I will have sons of all primarchs serving side by side, in squads of many gene-lines. In this way, I hope to build trust between the gene-lines, and help foster kinship. What was once used against us shall not be so used again. It should silence some fears, for a little while.’

‘Of course, my lord, I shall attend to it immediately.’

‘You will drink your wine first,’ said Guilliman with mock severity. He reached for the carafe, but misjudged the movement of his armour’s fingers, and knocked it over. Messinius caught it, and only a little slopped onto the papers on the table, but the upset made Guilliman frown. ‘This is another issue that must be dealt with soon,’ he said. ‘I cannot remain locked in ceramite for my entire life, nor can the regent of the Imperium be left dependent on xenos technologies. I will not be beholden to the aeldari, and not only because it leaves yet another avenue of attack on my motives open.’

Messinius poured them each more wine.

‘An issue for another day, as is this matter with the Primaris Marines,’ Guilliman said. ‘We must also talk a little of the coming campaign here, the principal reason I have summoned you. In brief, for I am aware the minutes race by, we are to invade, and weaken the necrons’ hold over the Nephilim Sector. This is a rich part of the galaxy. There are many worlds here, Ultramar is not too distant. The necrons must be suppressed, or the combination of their depredations and the rampages of the orks, which the Space Wolves work to contain further north, will destabilise all we have gained here in the Ultima Segmentum.’ He smiled somewhat ruefully. ‘Even as I speak, I think on breaking this oversized part of the Imperium into more manageable pieces. I do not think I can help myself.’

‘I shall do whatever is required of me, my lord. Do you wish to brief me now?’

‘It can wait. The intention is simple enough. Your part of it has largely been devised by Belisarius Cawl. I will allow him to explain tomorrow at the convocation. There are other issues, secrets the Adeptus Mechanicus have been keeping from us, more threats, more blood, more war. That can all wait, as well. I have a few minutes left for you. Let us not spend them as commander and follower. Tell me of your feats. We cannot leave the crusade behind completely, but I want to talk with you as a man for a while, not as a beleaguered general. I would hear of your adventures, and your successes, warrior to warrior.’

‘Very well,’ said Messinius. And he did the best he could to divert the primarch, before Tanus returned and politely informed the lord lieutenant his time was up.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

THE NEPHILIM CONVOCATION

GRAND STRATEGIUM

THE AWFUL TRUTH

‘I would be happier if we knew what the parameters of our mission were already,’ Thothven said.

He and Messinius were pushing their way from the central spinal crew train into the *Dawn of Fire*’s command superstructure. The Nephilim Convocation was to take place in the Grand Strategium. As the nerve centre for Guilliman’s efforts to save Imperium Sanctus, it was always full of people, but right then it seemed every human being within five light years was trying to get in.

‘We will know when the primarch tells us,’ said Messinius. He gently moved a junior Munitorum official aside. It was easier to navigate through crowds without his armour, and he was glad wearing it had not been mandated. ‘It will be important, and it will be difficult.’

‘He really told you nothing more?’

‘The primarch shares his strategies when it suits him. Lord Guilliman plans a major advance. Be content we know that. It is more than some of these people do.’

They joined the tide of people moving up the main access way to the strategium. Messinius and Thothven towered over most of them, and over the sea of heads could see all the way to the ornate doors guarded by Victrix Guard and four Custodians. The press thickened, and they could no longer move faster than the pace of the crowd without breaking bones, and they were reduced to a painful speed.

‘The whole of Fleet Primus is coming to this briefing,’ Thothven said irritably.

‘Do not complain. You would do well to learn more refined comportment. You will one day be a captain in a Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes.’

‘I am a captain now, brother.’

‘You are one among many. One day, you shall be one among ten. Captaincy in a Chapter brings with it additional responsibilities, including diplomacy. You are sour when confronted with duties you should find honourable. Do you not wish to witness your genefather?’

They pushed gently past a gaggle of mid-ranking Administratum scribes, who were shuffling forward under the weight of their many ledgers and awkward augmetics.

Thothven nodded. ‘You are right. My apologies, lord lieutenant. If I am truthful, the thought of being so near to him unnerves me.’

‘I wondered what had you in this bad humour.’

‘Is it truly as daunting as they say to be near him, even for us? You have spent time in his presence.’

‘It is, but you grow used to it,’ said Messinius.

They reached the open doors. People were queuing. Security measures were high. Servo-skulls flew up and down the river of humanity. Navis armsmen sweated in their armour, bad-tempered as they tried to marshal the flow of people. Messinius and Thothven’s signum codes were accepted quickly. Past the threshold, the chamber opened up expansively, and Thothven let out a noise of appreciation. He had not been within before.

‘This is an impressive facility.’

A vast, empty sphere made up most of the Grand Strategium. A pit at the bottom housed the powerful projection and cogitation machinery required to generate the large galactic maps Guilliman used to plot the progress of the crusade. The display was currently out, so the room was darker than normal, although it was not completely black: dim lumens on the many

levels rising up around the sphere lit the companionways and grav-stages and softened the shadows held at the centre of the display space.

Messinius remembered when the strategium was gleaming new, equipped with technology that recalled an earlier, more efficient age. Now the paint was chipped, and there was ingrained dirt in the deep recesses from the comings and goings of thousands of people.

The grav-stages that roosted around the strategium were filling up. Two already accommodated the delegations from Terra and Mars. The envoy of the Fabricator General was surrounded by archmagi of the highest ranks. The Terran delegation comprised representatives from every High Lord. None of the High Twelve had come in person, and Messinius was a little troubled by that fact, but at least the speaker of the Senatorum Imperialis had made the journey to lead the party, a woman named Anna-Murza Jek. Not a High Lord, but important nonetheless.

A third grav-stage was occupied by the Council Exterra, whose numbers were made up of representatives of the High Lords who permanently accompanied Guilliman on the crusade. Guilliman was on a fourth floating platform, Sicarius his sole companion, the captain’s hand forever gripping his sword hilt. They were high up, but far enough back that Messinius could see them. More swarms of servo-skulls patrolled the air. Cyber-constructs flapped by on noisy wings. Space Marines stood sentry every fifteen yards on every level, fully armed and armoured.

The walkways and stations around the hololithic pit were already full of people, and more were coming in: high-ranking officers from the Navis Imperialis, Adeptus Mechanicus, Adeptus Astartes, Astra Militarum and other, more esoteric organisations, plus all the many adepta, officios and departmenta that provided logistical support. Primus was the largest of all the fleets, with twenty battle groups, five of which were at Bane’s Landing. Other men and women wearing the badges of Quintus and Sextus made up a substantial minority of the crowd. Fleet Tertius also had some personnel present, but Messinius had been led to understand that they would receive their own briefing at their current anchorage near Nocturne.

A hubbub of voices reverberated round the sphere of the strategium, filling it up and making the air seem thick. The smell of so many humans packed so tight was strong in Messinius’ nostrils. He caught whiffs of fyceline and fire, blood and smoke. Thothven leaned in to whisper to Messinius.

‘Some of these people are fresh from battle.’

A member of the Logisticarum waved them over with a gently glowing baton, using it to indicate the direction they should go. She was one of hundreds all around the pit, marshalling the thousands entering the strategium. It took three painful minutes for them to find their allocated space with dozens of other Space Marines on a specially reinforced viewing gallery. Messinius didn’t remember it from before. He recognised several of the other Astartes, and exchanged words of greeting with them.

Stepped terraces furnished the gallery, allowing them all to see. Thothven couldn’t take his eyes off Guilliman, who was in discussion with Sicarius. Thothven had taken Messinius’ earlier comments to heart, and was mindful enough of the company they were in not to say anything foolish. Messinius remembered the first time he had seen Guilliman on Macragge, shortly after the primarch had awakened and driven off an attempted invasion by the Black Legion. He remembered the moment with crystal clarity, approaching the demigod enthroned, returned impossibly to life. On that occasion, confronted with a living, breathing primarch – his primarch – he had dropped to his knees and wept. Thothven, by comparison, was merely struck dumb.

Some time passed before clarions sounded and the doors to the strategium shut quietly. Sound was deadened by so many bodies. Their susurrus of breath and whispers rushed and hissed like the casting of waves. There was a mammalian heat. Clouds of condensation gathered in the upper reaches. Somewhere, atmospheric regulators activated, and cooler air washed down from on high.

A fanfare blared. The doors shut.

Guilliman’s grav-stage descended to a point just above the projection pit. During his time as Guilliman’s dux praestes, the primarch’s desire to appear in person had posed Messinius no end of problems. Even here, in this secure space aboard the crusade flagship, there could be agents of their enemies in the crowd, waiting to strike. Which enemy did not matter; there were enough of them. Mind-shackled slaves of the necrons, aeldari assassins using polymorphic technologies, operatives of any one of the Traitor Legions. The Alpha Legion were the most likely to attempt an assassination in full view. Even a baseline human with a grudge could pose a risk, given the right opportunity, and a little luck.

Messinius was glad it was no longer his responsibility. Sicarius performed those duties.

Guilliman raised his right hand. Upon his left was the Hand of Dominion, a power fist as big as Messinius' torso. Behind him, on a large stand, was the sword of the Emperor Himself. The fires were out. The blade's shining steel was so polished it was blue. Messinius had been in the presence of that weapon many times, but to think that it had been wielded by his god still sent a shudder of religious awe down his spine.

'My lords and ladies, loyal servants of the Imperium of Man. Visitors from Terra and Mars. I bid you welcome to this convocation of the Nephilim Sector. We gather here to deal with the emergent threat of the necrons, who awaken in untold numbers.' He paused. He was particularly stern that day, and he turned his hard gaze up at the platform of the delegation from the Adeptus Mechanicus.

'Some time ago, I received an urgent message from the Grand Synod of Mars, sent in the name of all the demesnes of the Red Planet. Intelligence, and a confession. Archmagos-Emmisarius Leeta Unter Sobel-Phi came to me from the Fabricator General themselves to elaborate on their news. She will share what she told me with you, now, from her own mouth, without elision.'

He gave the emmisarius an insistent look. It was obvious to Messinius that she did not wish to share her message with so many people. It was equally obvious she had no choice. Her attendants stood aside, their heavy toothed axes thumping on the deck as they stepped back. Compared to some of her party, Sobel-Phi was still relatively human-looking. She had not taken on the monstrous proportions some tech-priests acquired. She was still obviously female. Her face remained flesh, though her eyes were implants of a large and utilitarian sort that would have resembled goggles, were it not for the anchors buried in the skin of her face and pulling it tight. She sported a large mandibular upgrade, possibly in imitation of Cawl. Her hands and feet were all augmetics. Electoos glimmered where the flesh of her scalp was exposed.

She looked around the chamber. Messinius was no great judge of human character, but it was clear she was unwilling to speak.

Guilliman addressed her again.

‘You will tell them what you told me. If you will not reveal Mars’ lack of wisdom and the difficulties that brings for the entire Imperium, then I shall.’

Sobel-Phi’s augmitter activated with a loud, amplified hum.

‘If the son of the Omnissiah wishes that I share this confidential information, then so be it.’ Her voice reached every person in the strategium.

A mechadendrite stabbed out from under her robes into the console at the front of the grav-platform. The principal hololith activated with a crackle like distant gunfire, and a loud, deep throbbing that faded out of the range of human hearing. She made a few adjustments, and the galaxy erupted from the pit in a blaze of colour.

It was rare to see such a large light-weave representation of the galaxy with this level of accuracy. Guilliman’s logisticators had combed thousands of forgotten archives to assemble the map, working with more progressive scholars of the Astra Cartographica. Like many of Guilliman’s actions, the creation of the map had generated tensions within the minor adepta that had come close to outright war. But the work was done. The map existed, the best since the days when the Emperor walked the world of mortal men.

The purpose of many of the people who staffed the chamber on a regular basis was to update and refine the map. A constant stream of data came to them. Consequently, the map was huge, and beautiful in its intricacy. The spiral arms turned slowly before the audience, trailing long, hazy streamers of stars. The bright yolk of the core blazed with a milky fire, the bar of stars across it so straight and perfect that Messinius could almost credit the Adeptus Mechanicus’ belief that the Machine God had fashioned it. Perfection ended there. A great, jagged scar ran across the galaxy, roughly dividing it into two. This was the Great Rift, and it boiled with unclean energies. There were many other of these purplish wounds scattered through the firmament, so it seemed the galaxy was diseased with the seeping warp. For now, the cartolith carried no data-tags, no borders or boundaries or arrows of military movement. Without them, one could almost believe that the warp rifts were a naturally occurring phenomenon. But when the map was fully loaded with all its informational layers, it was clear that war wracked the galaxy from end to end.

‘The major forge worlds of the Imperium,’ Sobel-Phi said. Several dozen systems shone, their stars haloed by the cog and skull of the Cog

Mechanicum. Tiny scripts unrolled, giving their names: Mars, Triplex Phall, Ryza, Agripinaa, Lucius and all the rest.

‘These are the initial contact sites of the alien species we have come to know as the necrons. Limited to ruined complexes at first, they were taken to be the archaeological remains of a long-extinct species.’

A few hundred systems glittered green.

‘Suspicions were initially aroused that this race may have been widespread by the far-ranging dispersal of identical complexes across multiple sectors. Alas, these concerns were dismissed. Then the awakening began. Scattered reports from several worlds, with the first verified contact at Sanctuary 101, 897.M41, pre-Rift calendar. Eastern Fringe. Adepta Sororitas preceptories. No survivors. Later, Captain Uriel Ventris of Adeptus Astartes Chapter Ultramarines encountered a powerful entity on Pavonis we now know to be a shard of the C’tan designated Nightbringer. More encounters were recorded. There were undoubtedly many more that were not. Rise in necron activity corresponds with increased notifications of lost expeditions to archeotech sites on what have since been revealed to be necron tomb worlds. These are the known facts. The necrons were named, catalogued, designated a tertiary-grade xenos threat. The acknowledged species range believed at the time is as displayed.’

More lights. More worlds. More necrons.

There was no response to this; no one spoke. The majority of the people in the room were of high rank, and knew enough of the perils facing the Imperium. This was not new to them. But the way Sobel-Phi hesitated before continuing evoked a sense of foreboding in the room. Messinius’ scalp prickled.

Sobel-Phi bowed her head, a gesture heavy with shame, then spoke in a rush. ‘This data was largely provided to Imperial authorities by we of the Adeptus Mechanicus. It was knowingly incomplete. Behold, the true extent of the necron threat.’

She raised her hand, and the galaxy exploded with green light. Lines ran around huge swathes of the cosmos, delimiting xenos territories.

‘This, to the best of our current understanding, represents the full extent of necron holdings in the galaxy.’

There were gasps then, and outrage from the crowds. This was news, and it was unwelcome. The areas contained by the lines were together equal to a

quarter of the spatial extent of the Imperium, and there was a great deal of overlap between necron and human territory.

‘Current best estimates suggest there are probably many more.’

Sobel-Phi was silent again. Individual exclamations became shouts. The crowd heaved and muttered like a beast plagued by bad dreams.

‘Living Emperor,’ Thothven muttered. ‘How can this be?’

‘The Adeptus Mechanicus are the servants of the Imperium, but their masters pay attention to that mainly when it suits them,’ said Messinius quietly.

She laid out then what she had said to Roboute Guilliman, of the Adeptus Mechanicus’ war against the necrons, of the scale of it, and how they were losing. Her words were met with increasingly angry words.

An aggressive fanfare blared from false angels with trumpets sutured to their lips. Their clockwork wings rattled and they flew through the projection, repeating their harsh music around the grand chamber. Servo-skulls followed, augmitters shouting.

‘Silence, silence, silence, the Imperial Regent will speak.’

Sobel-Phi bowed her head and retreated. Her grav-platform rose away from the anger of the assembly.

‘Judge not,’ said Guilliman, and his voice was that of a god roused from his sleep upon the mountains, his ire shouted down to the towns and villages beneath his eternal gaze. ‘The Imperium is divided, mired in secrecy. Vested interests war with one another as the edifice of empire threatens to collapse upon us. Do not judge. Do not decry. If you wish to condemn the Cult of the Machine, whose efforts support the technology of our Imperium, I ask you to look honestly within your hearts and tell me that your particular organisation, be it Navy, Adeptus Administratum, or Space Marine Chapter, has never put its own interests before those of Terra, and He who sits upon the Golden Throne.’

He stared around the room. He had a trick, although Messinius was not sure it was only a trick, of making everyone in a group, no matter how large, feel that his eye was upon them, and that he weighed their deeds personally.

‘The adepts of Mars were wrong to conceal this. We can waste our breath in recrimination, or we can act together to confront this threat and defeat it.

The choice is yours. It is the same choice the Emperor gave our species ten thousand years ago – unity, or death.’

A tense silence descended, interrupted only by the crackle of the lithic projectors and the murmurings of cyber-constructs floating through the fields of stars.

‘There is a way to overcome these monstrous alien machines. It starts here. I summon Archmagos Belisarius Cawl.’

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Chapter Twenty-Four

A MAN OF MODEST GENIUS

THE FATE OF KALLIDES

THE NEXUS

Belisarius Cawl emerged from the shadows at the base of the pit, where the room curved inward to the array of ribbon projectors that wove the semblance of the galaxy out of light and air. His long, augmented body made him resemble a centipede more than ever. He fiddled with something at the side of his mandibular shield, and when he spoke again, his voice filled the vast spaces of the hololithic chamber.

'Greetings, my ladies and lords of the Imperium. I beg your indulgence for a lengthy speech. What I have to say is complex and not easily summarised.'

He went to a large console. His many appendages darted about the control board. Miniature images of Cawl appeared on every platform and at various places around the galleries to address the delegates personally.

'My thanks to our lord and saviour, the Avenging Son, Last Loyal Primarch and offspring of the Omnissiah Him–'

'Archmagos,' said Guilliman levelly. 'To the matter at hand.'

'As you wish,' said Cawl. 'I am a stickler for the proper etiquette, as you know.' He bowed. 'We come now to one of the great battles of our time.' He

scuttled around the hololithic pit. Not once did he stop, but went round and round, his servo-carriage's bladed legs clattering with an incessant, rippled beat, but the images of his face floating in front of all the parties making up the convocation did not move.

'As we have heard from my most esteemed colleagues, the necrons are waking across the galaxy. Why they are awakening like this is a matter for conjecture. However, the creation of this Nephilim Anomaly gives us a clue.'

Cawl changed the cartolith by some means so that the image zoomed in, until the audience gazed upon a star map of the local area.

'The Nephilim Sector, and surrounding systems,' he said.

The sector was a substantial one, encompassing a significant part of the Ultima Segmentum. It bridged the gap between one of the major spiral arms and the thick spur projecting from it, both named for ancient heroes of Old Earth. Though the galactic disc thinned towards its southern edge, the area held hundreds of thousands of stars and millions of worlds. When seen as a whole, the galaxy was too large to comprehend. Hundreds of billions was a number to defeat human understanding. So men and women saw the galaxy complete and they were not awed by it. Their egos imposed themselves upon the cosmos with ease. Only when a part of the galaxy was depicted, small enough for the human mind to grasp, only then did the whole appear staggering. Cawl's concentration on this smaller area, with its millions rather than billions of worlds, forced many of the people present to reflect on the thinly spread nature of the Imperium, the vastness of space, the uncounted, unknown planets where new threats might even now be waking. A million worlds sounded numerous, and strong. A dominating force. Seen in context, the Imperium's holdings were scattered, akin to single grains of sand in a desert.

Cawl let them dwell on it. They needed to. Realism was the key to victory.

To the galactic east the Nephilim Sector was bounded by the outlying systems of Ultramar. To the north-east were the wild ork worlds of the Charadon Sector. Further south saw the density of stars attenuate into the halo. West, the sector ended at the border of the Segmentum Tempestus. North-west the home world of the Salamanders stood sentinel. Directly north, another of the galaxy's spiral arms filled the firmament with light, and a new sector began. Cawl made another adjustment, and several

hundred points of light brightened. Name tags appeared by their sides, denoting the Imperium's worlds.

'I am not exaggerating when I say that we are in danger of losing this entire sector. An unconscionable loss. We face the necrons of two factions in this zone. As far as we can ascertain, the necrons are not unified, not yet, but split into a number of different dynasties.'

Coloured overlays corresponding to the xenos realms spread, imposing non-Imperial borders on Imperial space. Offended mutterings spread through the strategium. Lights intensified within these stellar realms, and turned a cold green. These were known necron systems.

'These are our best estimates of the areas claimed by the aliens. These images are disturbing, I admit,' said Cawl. 'But this is far more disturbing.'

The view of the galaxy pulled back and out again, so that once more the spiral arms of the galaxy uncoiled. Green was visible everywhere. One necron realm spread up, covering a massive portion of the eastern galaxy.

'The necron faction calling itself "Sautekh" has been witnessed throughout this entire region of space, on both sides of the Rift,' said Cawl. 'These and the boundaries of other kingdoms upon this galactic cartolith are based on sound evidence, gathered by the finest logisticians and datavores across the Imperium. You may be alarmed by this. I wish to alarm you.'

The map zoomed back in to the Nephilim Sector.

'Some of you may be aware of the examinations I undertook of the pylon networks once found around the Eye of Terror, most famously upon Cadia itself. My efforts built upon that of the esteemed Archmagos Esotericus Sigulus Herstoffen of Stygies, though of course I have developed his work much further. As time is limited, I shall not go into the exceedingly complex details of how these things work, but suffice it to say, the necron pylons employ negatively empyrically charged noctilith in order to dampen the effects of the warp. Around the Cadian Gate, these pylons helped keep the Eye of Terror confined to its historical boundaries. With enough of them in the right place, the entirety of the empyrean's influence could be nullified. Where the pylons are concentrated, as in the Nephilim Anomaly, the materium is in effect divorced from the immaterium. If this might sound like a good thing, you would be wrong to think so. The Great Work of the Machine God was made with the warp and the universe in balance, each influencing the other. Too much crossover between them has many great

and deleterious effects. This is a given. You have all witnessed the effects of the warp on realspace, in one way or another. But what is not so widely known among you is that too little warp is also dangerous. Without the touch of the warp, the human soul cannot function. This is the cause of the stilling effect reported from within this anomaly and elsewhere. Human beings cut free completely from the spiritual aspect of the universe.'

This upset the attendees more than Sobel-Phi's confession. Angry shouts echoed around the strategium, especially from the priests. For all but a few cognoscenti, who were already party to the truth, what Cawl said was the rankest blasphemy. Fury spread quickly. More people shouted, calling him arch-heretic, and deviant.

An explosive boom silenced them all. Messinius had been so absorbed by what Cawl was saying, he had ceased to watch the primarch. He looked over now to Guilliman. The primarch was on his feet. Part of the barrier around the platform had been obliterated. The edges smoked. The foxfire of a dying disruption field guttered around his gauntlet.

'Be silent!' Guilliman said. 'I care not if your beliefs are offended. I do not care if you do not believe Archmagos Cawl. You will listen to him.'

Thousands of pairs of eyes turned up to the primarch's dais. The Space Marines on guard around the companionways made themselves more conspicuous.

'Thank you,' said Cawl. 'Now, where was I? Yes. Yes. So, material effects upon the good functioning of our Imperium. Where the pylons are concentrated in sufficient numbers, astropathic communication is impossible. We must also expect that in the deeper reaches of the nexus, warp travel may be impossible. While our methods of communication are prevented, our enemies, who are blessed with technologies beyond our comprehension, may strike at will.'

This last part of his speech was also highly blasphemous, but this time, the audience's eyes flicked towards the primarch, who stood looking fiercely down upon them, and nobody raised an objection.

'Naturally we cannot allow this to persist. The necrons must be confronted and defeated, or they will overwhelm the galactic south while we continue with our war against our own kind.' Each and every one of his light-spun facsimiles smiled apologetically. 'And then they will kill us all.'

Guilliman spoke once more.

‘From early in the crusade, I have been aware of the threat growing here. I underestimated it, and my first steps to break these alien monstrosities were insufficient.’

An arrow depicting a fleet advance nosed out from Terra. Unlike most other depictions of the crusade, which showed fleets and battle groups endlessly breaking apart and re-forming, this one went straight for the Pariah Nexus.

‘Thanks to the efforts of members of the Adeptus Administratum, I learned of this issue soon after I left Terra,’ said Guilliman. ‘In response, I despatched Battle Group Kallides of Fleet Primus as a reconnaissance in force. Their voyage was slow. They were engaged many times on their journey. They finally arrived a few years ago, whereupon Groupmaster Marron ordered a multipronged advance into the nexus from the north-west towards the Paradyce System, Shen’Tai, Vertigus and Zeidos. For some months, regular astropathic communiques were received. From these we learned of the stilling.’

Guilliman interrupted his briefing, and waved a hand. ‘There is information on this in the data packets you have all received, but it is best described as a lethargy of the animus corpus, with the worst affected becoming completely non-responsive. Planets once inhabited by mankind were found empty of inhabitants. Ghost worlds, seemingly abandoned by everyone, simultaneously. Ships encountered flew without guidance, their crew catatonic. As the fleet pushed on deeper into Nephilim, these reports became less frequent, and Kallides began to use the term “the Pariah Nexus”. The necrons made no move against the fleets, until, not long after, there was a major engagement at Mesmoch, where the first of the new pylons was discovered. It was ascertained by magi accompanying the fleet that the pylon was the source of the stilling. Attempts by my own Ultramarines to destroy this pylon were to no avail, and provoked the necrons into opposing Kallides’ advance.

‘There were many setbacks. After that, little news escaped the zone, and all attempts to reach the fleet via astrotelepathy from outside the boundary zone failed. A few messenger ships have made it back. From what we know, the battle group headed deeper into the Pariah Nexus, suffering heavy losses, being assailed by necrons at many systems on the way. Major losses were reported at Paradyce, Vie Almus Major, and Kalliphor. The last reports

maintained that those people who had the greatest faith in the Emperor were the least affected. The battle-saint Ephrael Stern is with them, and by her hand Marron's first victory was won, at Cherist. Then, the messages ceased, and we have had no word. Since then, the Pariah Nexus has grown.'

Guilliman let his grav-platform drop and rotate slowly so that he could address all the room, and the strategium was hushed as the primarch spoke.

'Cawl will now brief you on the attack further, after which all of you will be given specific orders. Pay heed to him. I will brook no further interruptions, no matter how distasteful his opinions may seem to you.'

Cawl scuttled onto another grav-stage. It carried him up into the middle of the hololithic pit. Projections broke around him, disrupting the illusion, until he reconfigured the display, shrinking it down to the middle portion of the chamber. Into this space, he cast an image of the Pariah Nexus once more, this time heavily appended with data. Necron territory, human territory, minor xenos worlds, wilderness space, and major system names, until the whole of it was crowded with additional information that blotted out the stars.

'The necrons have established a number of pylon worlds throughout the sector,' he said. 'As they dominate an amount of territory in this region, they were able to establish their network without raising alarm. I believe they began here, at the edge of the territory of the dynasty that calls itself "Nihilakh". You will note that, assuming the necrons claim space around these worlds here' – more planets illuminated – 'then their supposed borders cover Imperial-held systems in many places. The exact locations of all their worlds are as yet unknown, nor do we know the positions of all pylon-bearing planets, but that is for our purposes now unimportant. From here, they have expanded to the galactic north. Here we do have information relating to the positions of some of these new pylon planets.'

Points of light winked on. Rounds of light spread from them, and overlapped.

'These lenticular shapes you see here denote the areas of stilling spread by every world where pylons are found. Where these fields overlap, the stilling effect is most pronounced. By studying the positioning of the known pylon worlds here, near our position, and the pattern the necrons appear to be creating, it is possible to extrapolate to within a fourth degree of accuracy the positions of other pylon planets deeper into the zone.'

Further indicators came on, these a dull orange instead of a vibrant green. The areas of stilled space were rendered in a similar colour.

‘Note that at the very edges of the zone, the effect is lesser, and in some ways beneficial to us. Here we are moving through areas that are under enough of the xenos machines’ influence to calm the warp, but not enough to divide materium from immaterium fully enough to cause the effects we have seen deeper in. You may think of this as the spiritual penumbra. The deeper one goes, the more overlap there is between the stilling fields, and the worse the problem becomes. I have devised a scale for calculating the effect on the functioning of various grades of Imperial soldiery when in contact with the necrons’ fields.’

A complicated chart flashed up and vanished almost as quickly.

‘This will be circulated to your data-savants as soon as this briefing is over. You may thank me if you wish – this task was exceptionally complicated, but I am, after all, a man of modest genius.’

He laughed. Strangely, Messinius thought. Cawl was peculiarly manic, full of a disturbing energy and waving his arms around. Messinius had met the magos on several occasions; rarely did he seem to be the same man twice.

‘Our strategy is therefore to cause enough damage to the network to allow a greater penetration of our fleets into the nexus without our personnel suffering from the stilling, while retaining the ability to cross the warp with relative ease. Attacking the nearest necron world and hoping for the best will simply not work. We must carefully select our target.’

Images attached via data-flags to various systems sprang into being. ‘The pylons in this network are unique to the world they are established upon. If anything, I suggest this shows an advancement of the technology seen at Cadia and other, latterly identified pylon worlds. I have partly drawn this conclusion due to the variation in form, which did not exist to the same extent around Cadia. For example, see here at Mesmoch, in the Zeidos System, the pylon was solitary, and very large.’

A grainy pict-capture bloomed to fill the space. It showed a cloud-piercing, pyramidal tower.

‘The upper reaches of this pylon exceed the depth of Mesmoch’s atmosphere.’ Cawl emphasised another image, this one of an entire world created from various picts pasted together. ‘Here, at Gu-Oli, the pylons are much smaller and concentrated in three distinct areas, where the rest of the

world was left untouched. Of the twenty or so worlds we have direct confirmation of hosting pylons, not one grouping is the same. This leads me to conclude they are part of an immense device, a huge, cosmological machine of unparalleled complexity, and though each one projects a part of the stilling field, they have other properties. Divining what those properties are has been hard, therefore choosing the most relevant target has been difficult. The system is robust. The necrons are a race fond of redundancy and preservation, after all' – he chuckled to himself at his joke – 'therefore our task is to take it down, piece by piece.'

He paused, a calculated silence full of self-serving drama, Messinius thought.

'But I have, ladies and gentlemen, found the perfect target. How? Well… the technical answer is far too intricate for most humans to comprehend, but the simple reason is, because I am Belisarius Cawl.'

With a flourish of a clawed tentacle, Cawl waved away the Pariah Nexus, banishing it to a portion of the space. A planet ballooned up from the near edge of the zone to take its place.

'Our old friend Mesmoch again. It is a matter of great good fortune that the Ultramarines discovered this world, for it has proven to be one of the keystones of the web the necrons have cast across space. Should we destroy this, then we shall be free to attack several other worlds within striking distance, destroying them, and causing a chain-reaction collapse of the stilling effect.'

On the cartolith showing the nexus, the disc around Mesmoch burst. Fleet icons moved into the open space, split, and attacked three surrounding worlds, then the process was repeated. With each successful attack, more of the nexus went dark.

'Fleet Primus will take the role of assaulting Mesmoch. Meanwhile, Fleet Tertius shall undertake the assault upon the Paradyce System. They will be forced to respond to both, and in doing so, split their forces, thus ensuring the forces already at Paradyce are saved, and our mission is successful at Mesmoch.'

Cawl looked around the room.

'We move at a propitious moment. An ork war-migration is building in the south-east. The necrons have many distractions. We can predict their response. We can do this because the necrons are monsters, yes, but they are

rational monsters, which I, your humble servant, have undertaken to understand and in doing so, save us all.’

Guilliman spoke. ‘Make no mistake. These attacks will draw the necrons’ attention quickly,’ he said. ‘These networks are of the highest priority to them, and they watch them closely. Each of you here has their role to play. Detailed orders will be disseminated to you. Go to your duty, and may the Emperor watch over you all.’

There followed a thunderous applause, although there were many quizzical faces in the crowd. Thothven leaned in to Messinius.

‘He is not telling us the whole strategy.’

‘Of course he is not,’ said Messinius.

‘And we still do not know our orders. Will we be directed to rejoin the fleet, I wonder. Paradyce or Zeidos?’

Messinius saw that Guilliman was looking directly at him.

‘I do not think that it will be either.’

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Chapter Twenty-Five

PLANET 7/2

A BOLD APPROACH

DIVERSION

‘Obviously,’ said Cawl later that night, ‘one does not destroy something as well engineered as this Pariah Nexus with the application of a metaphorical brick. No offence to your crusade fleets, my lord Guilliman.’

‘I have long gone past being offended by you, archmagos,’ said Guilliman. ‘Proceed.’

Once more, Messinius found himself in Guilliman’s librarium, with Thothven this time, Cawl, and one of Cawl’s servants, a machine-priest named Qvo, who had a bewildered expression.

‘Really, we need to target a pylon world which has some sort of influence over other worlds, allowing us to disrupt a large section of the network with one, carefully positioned strike.’

‘Mesmoch does not fit into that category, I take it?’

‘Not as far as I know,’ said Cawl. ‘It is a simple nodal point with some specific directional lensing purposes, hence the great size, but nothing more complicated than that.’ He was less manic than before, his speech more measured. Once again, Messinius had the impression he was speaking with a different person. ‘What we really want is a world like this.’

He opened his human hand in a theatrical fashion. A tri-d representation of a planet appeared over it: dun, brown, and accompanied by a little moon.

‘I call this world Planet 7/2. It is in an area of wilderness space, far from Imperial settlements, in the Tredica System. What you are seeing is an image generated at the last Astra Cartographica survey, one hundred and twelve years ago, when it was a simple, dusty ball of minimal interest.’ He smiled slyly. ‘But this is what it looks like now.’

He waved a hand over the projection in the way of a street magician. It really did baffle Messinius why Guilliman put up with Cawl’s antics. The hololith changed.

‘Adeptus Mechanicus probes discovered the modifications. They are quite recent, and of a staggering scale. You may thank my colleagues for their minor contribution at your leisure, or just thank me, and I’ll pass it on.’

Large parts of Planet 7/2 had turned tar-black. Dead straight, deep-cut canyons radiated from six heavily built-up areas dotted seemingly at random around the surface. Greenish light shone from the trenches, some of which looked to be miles wide and miles deep. A thin ring of debris had taken the moon’s place.

‘Over thirty per cent of this world has been plated with noctilith,’ Cawl said. ‘It is fascinating, this level of construction in such a short space of time. I have comparator pics, if–’

‘It will not be necessary, Belisarius,’ said Guilliman.

‘Well, this planet is very important. It is a control mechanism for a significant part of the great device the necrons have shackled the stars with. It is this world we must disable so our fleets are free to move further into the Pariah Nexus. A tunnel, if you will, through the cosmos. And we want your White Consuls to take it.’

Thothven looked to Messinius, then to Cawl.

‘I think you have spoiled the lord lieutenant’s surprise, archmagos,’ said Guilliman.

‘I have?’ said Cawl, peering up from his examination of the orb floating over his hand. ‘Oh. In what way?’

‘My lord?’ Thothven asked.

‘You and the men still under my command are to form the core of the reborn White Consuls,’ said Messinius. ‘I had hoped to reveal this at a more appropriate time.’

‘Ah, in that sense. Sorry,’ said Cawl.

‘We shall discuss it later, Thothven. Keep it to yourself. These things must be announced properly.’

‘Yes, lord lieutenant.’

‘Do you have detailed tactical information?’ Messinius asked. ‘If you wish us to attack this world, then a method of delivery must be chosen.’

‘You will have to make a drop assault,’ said Cawl. ‘I have at my disposal a means of fooling the aliens’ detection systems. A false xenos ident signum – that is an accurate enough description for our purposes here. Your drop pods will be equipped with devices that will screen their machine spirits and allow you to descend to the surface without being detected.’

‘Drop pods carry an inherent risk,’ said Messinius. ‘If you can deceive the aliens’ devices, then it would be of more tactical merit to bring down our forces in gunships, that way we would have an easier route off-world, and would be able to deploy heavier equipment.’

Underneath all his layers of augmetics, the wizened face of Belisarius Cawl pulled an apologetic expression.

‘If only it could be so, then I would be delighted to accommodate you. Alas, there is a good reason to employ the drop pod as a means of infiltrating the planet.’

Cawl waved a hand and a second hololith was projected from the lenses of one of his flock of servo-skulls.

‘Let us employ this Thunderhawk gunship as an example,’ he said. A large, boxy gunship spun slowly around in front of him. The Thunderhawk was a typical Space Marine craft: blunt, aggressive, festooned in weapons. Cawl had chosen to depict this one in the livery of the Ultramarines, possibly to honour Guilliman, possibly out of some whimsical humour. He waved his hand again, and the ship’s hull plating flew apart, showing in a semi-transparent form the multiple systems of the ship. He waved another limb, and these began to flash one by one. ‘The gunship has an impressive array of technologies. Multiple machine spirits to operate its array of weaponry, advanced avionic systems, many redundant systems, target assist cogitators, wide-spectrum auguries… It is a glorious example of the Machine God’s bounty. But,’ he said, holding up a mechadendrite as if it were an exclamatory finger, ‘therein lies the rub, as the great dramaturge Shaksspear once said. The motive force runs strongly through every inch of it, and that,

I am afraid, makes it vulnerable to detection. The chameleonic codes I am to provide will only mask a simpler device.’

‘Like a drop pod,’ said Thothven.

‘Exactly.’

Another image took the place of the Thunderhawk. The drop pod had a faint resemblance to an egg, being heavier on the bottom and narrow at the top. Most of the lower assembly was occupied by a large braking engine. Five tall petal doors ran up nearly the whole of its height, each separated from the next by reinforced vanes that extended beyond the hull and made a tight crown. There was a second engine sitting on top which was smaller than the one on the bottom, but not by much.

Once more, Cawl performed his technomantic tricks, and turned the machine’s hull invisible.

‘As you can see, very few components have been revealed, because there were not very many to reveal. The most sophisticated part of this machine is its machine spirit, a simple mind which controls the acceleration, braking and attitudinal jets. There is not much more to it than that. This is not really a spacecraft, it is barely even a conveyance. It is perhaps best viewed as a munition, fired from a cannon, with you, my fine Adeptus Astartes, the explosive charge. Only…’ Cawl chuckled another apology. ‘The machine spirits will be disabled, because the devices of the necrons are incredibly sensitive. All thruster firing will be accomplished manually.’

‘That will be especially dangerous,’ said Messinius.

‘Indeed it will,’ said Cawl. ‘But it is the only way. There is another reason why I have chosen Planet 7/2.’ The image still held above his hand pulled out. ‘It is periodically bombarded by material from orbit. The world was registered as accompanied by a moon, as you saw. As you can also see, it has gone, I suspect as a consequence of the necrons’ planetary engineering. The world’s mass has increased significantly, what is left above is mere scraps. The defences do not appear to be triggered by these meteor falls. We shall disguise ourselves as debris, and enter their realm unnoticed.’

‘You are accompanying us?’

‘I am.’

‘Then we shall be an advance team,’ said Messinius.

‘Exactly so, lord lieutenant,’ said Cawl. ‘I have large devices that, if placed precisely, will form a different kind of screen. How it works is not really

pertinent, but it casts a quantum-level chameleonic corridor into orbit down which–'

'Cawl,' said Guilliman. 'If it is not pertinent, it is not pertinent.'

'My apologies, my lord. The baseline of this adventure is that your initial landing will have to be stealthy. Once you are down, you will deploy these devices that I have created, and the stronger chameleonic effect they project will be sufficient to allow the landing of gunships and the deployment of more men, including further members of the Adeptus Mechanicus. This group will be divided into two teams, with two distinct roles. The first shall be led by myself, the other by Magos Perscrutor Camalin Hiax, who has a deal of experience robbing necron tombs. Once we are all down, he shall lead your strike force deep into the monolith complexes, where your primary objective will be to disrupt the necrons' ability to reinforce themselves. They are arrogant beings, and their worlds are often patrolled by simple machine constructs that lack true sentience. They are clever enough to summon aid, though, and although my cloaking devices are good, nothing is ever foolproof.

'Secondary objectives will be to limit the complex's guardian constructs' ability to respond to our intrusion themselves, but the crucial goal is to stop the opening of the necrons' transdimensional gates once we are detected. And make no mistake, we will be detected eventually. Meanwhile, I shall proceed here' – Cawl zoomed the hololith down to the surface, onto a sky-scraping pyramid – 'where I will introduce xenos-compatible code, once more of my own devising,' he said smugly, 'that will grant control of the local monolith network to a distance of several systems. Thus opening up a channel into the Nephilim Anomaly to allow Imperial fleets to penetrate necron territory, where they will attack and destroy secondary targets, by Exterminatus if need be, as I showed you earlier today. If these secondary worlds are destroyed, the effects of stilling on nearby Imperial worlds will cease, and the path will be open to subsectors deeper in the system.'

'Which worlds?' Messinius asked. 'I take it the examples given in the strategium were not the actual targets.'

Guilliman maintained a neutral expression.

'You cannot say.'

'The less you know, the better,' Guilliman said. 'The less anyone knows, the better. There are other things at stake here it is best we do not divulge.'

‘I understand,’ said Messinius.

‘Will the necrons fall for your diversion, my lord regent?’ asked Thothven.

Cawl answered. ‘The necrons have a great many faults. Chief among them is their hubris. They believe themselves to be the first of the great pan-galactic civilisations. They believe all others that followed, including ours, to be enormously inferior.’

‘You have learned this from your studies, I suppose,’ Messinius said.

‘No,’ said Cawl. ‘I have learned this from personal association. I spent some time with a lord of their kind, by the name of Trazyn the Infinite. He was a pompous creature.’

‘They worked with you?’ Thothven asked. Even with his dull, first-generation Primaris emotions, he seemed incredulous.

‘Necron-Imperial cooperation has occurred in the past, and the higher forms are as individual as we are,’ said Cawl. ‘He and I worked together, as it happens, to save Cadia. Throughout he behaved towards me as if I knew nothing. It was an opinion I did little to disabuse him of, naturally. I played stupid, if you will. One doesn’t wish to telegraph the cards one will lay.’

‘How hard that must have been for you, pretending to be less than the most brilliant being alive,’ said Qvo, speaking for the first time.

‘Not easy,’ said Cawl, without a shred of irony. ‘The short version of all this is that they will believe our little pantomime, because they do not look deeper into the motivations of other species. They are masters of the material universe. They see us as animals. They killed their gods. They overthrew the first great empires. Everything is beneath them, from their point of view. Imperial strategy is often blunt, predicated upon overwhelming firepower and the application of resources until the problem at hand has been smashed flat. Thus far, this is what they have seen. Examinations of Imperial records show they have little direct experience of more subtle methods, such as those the Adeptus Astartes excel at. A simple canid can surprise you with its acumen, from time to time.’

‘So we shall be that canid,’ said Messinius.

‘Good boy,’ said Cawl. ‘That’s about the size of it, yes. Our big advantage is that you Space Marines are something of an unknown quantity to the necrons.’

‘There have been scores of conflicts between the Adeptus Astartes and the necrons,’ said Messinius.

‘Not as many as you might think,’ said Cawl. ‘It is true there have been a number of occasions where the necrons have seen your kind fight in large groups. Before the Rift, at Cryptus in the Red Scar, for example, where the necrons and Imperium united against the tyranids of Hive Fleet Leviathan. These instances have probably led them to believe that the Adeptus Astartes are an elite element of larger forces, and they are not aware of your more subtle abilities. You remain just enough of an unknown quantity to surprise them. If we succeed.’

‘We shall succeed.’

‘That’s the spirit,’ said Cawl.

‘We present them with not one but two forms of bait,’ said Guilliman. ‘They will not wish for us to re-establish a foothold at the Paradyce System. Committing an entire crusade fleet to that action will draw huge numbers of necrons in response.’

‘They will be in danger,’ said Messinius, thinking of Athagey.

‘I do not believe in expendable assets, Vitrian, if that is what you are implying. Fleet Tertius is strong, large, and VanLeskus is one of the best void commanders I have. I expect them to have a hard fight, but I also expect them to win.’

‘Then your attack on Mesmoch is a second diversion. There…’ He frowned. ‘You are the diversion.’

‘That is so, Vitrian,’ said Guilliman.

‘Forgive me, my lord, but as your former warden, I must advise against this course of action.’

‘You are not the first to say this to me, nor will you be the last,’ said Guilliman. ‘I hear your concern. I will proceed anyway. I am too tempting a target for them to ignore. Their efforts will be split. Their transluminal technologies may be advanced, but they are not of infinite capability. There will only be so much force that they will be able to bring to bear. I will give them a real choice. My head, or our establishment of a foothold. Either they concentrate their forces on one thrust, and we fall back and win the other, or they split their efforts and risk losing both battles.’

‘Meanwhile, we shall slip through their net and wreak havoc upon our true target,’ said Cawl.

‘Then the elements of Fleets Quintus and Sextus are not all intended for follow-up at all,’ said Messinius. ‘You are going to try to trap them, and

eliminate their forces. Correct?’

‘Once more, I must plead silence,’ said Guilliman.

Messinius nodded.

‘Planetfall on Planet 7/2 must be conducted with the utmost speed and secrecy,’ said Guilliman. ‘I cannot stress that this is the most important part of this entire advance, small as it may seem compared to the movements of the fleets in these other systems. A lot is resting on you, my son.’

Messinius nodded. ‘I am honoured by your faith in me. I shall do my best to justify it.’

‘Not an honour, a considered practical,’ said Guilliman. ‘You are a fine warrior. Your men have been nowhere near this part of the galaxy. They have not fought the necrons. We can be sure that there is no xenos contamination among them to give away our true goals. You are the best man for this task, for a great many reasons, Vitrian.’

‘Then I shall not let you down.’

‘I know you will not,’ said Guilliman.

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Chapter Twenty-Six

DEAD END

THE NATURE OF POWER

RECONCILIATION

The Dead End lived up to its name. There was no life in it other than Eloise Athagey. She sank into its quiet, settled into one of the chairs and gave out a long, melancholy breath. She swung her feet up onto the wood of the conference table. Her boot soles left a scuff. Diomed would chide her for that. But Diomed wasn't there, and Athagey didn't give a damn about propriety.

Athagey avoided the chair at the head of the table when she was alone. Why, she wasn't sure. It was the shipmaster's chair, so it was her chair. But she only sat there when there were others present in the room.

Sometimes, when the chair was more than usually daunting, she thought a lack of confidence stopped her going straight to the head of the table. Lack of faith in herself or some such nonsense. She snorted at that, and swigged her drink. That was preposterous. She was objectively a good captain – no, an excellent captain – there were records, commendations and kill counts. She wasn't one of those self-proclaimed martyrs who did everything they could to feel unworthy.

‘Heads empty as vacuum, those types,’ she murmured. She had no sympathy for people like that.

Still, sometimes, sometimes… She eyed the chair sidelong. It seemed to be judging her.

She laughed again. She was already getting drunk.

‘So then, why am I not in it?’ she mused. She affected a self-mocking tone. It covered her unease poorly.

She sipped her drink, letting the burn in her throat distract her. The chair was angled slightly towards her. It had a peaked top and split down the back rest with a diamond-shaped hole where it bent in to support the spine. It reminded her of a face. Behind it, the statue of Saint Aster stooped in her watering of the poor. The trickle of the water piped through the amphora balanced on her shoulder and into the little pool at the saint’s feet competed with Athagey’s breathing. The saint was looking away from Athagey, her mind always on higher matters. The chair, a piece of furniture, had more presence than the saint. Aster could have been anyone.

A voice she sometimes heard, in those black moods she didn’t like to own, came to her. Athagey had the disturbing sense the statue was speaking. It was easy to fool herself, with the saint’s face turned away.

It’s because you aren’t worthy. Your confidence is arrogance. You drink too much. You are unpredictable. You have a stimm habit. You take too many risks. The galaxy is burning and they gave you this ship to stop it and you are not up to the task.

‘Maybe it’s *your* chair, then, your holiness,’ Athagey said aloud. She moved a little, adjusting her position so she could tell herself she was making herself comfortable and not surreptitiously checking if Saint Aster was speaking. She saluted the statue, and took a nip of her drink. Then she turned deliberately from the chair and the saint and looked resolutely forward. ‘I just prefer the view from here, that’s all.’

That was at least believable. The row of chairs on the inside of the room faced the long viewing pane that opened out onto space. Fleet Tertius sailed across void the velvety black of a feline’s coat, the distant stars drowned out by the Paradyce System. In that round of glaring white the whole system was contained: several worlds, its shield of comets, the unimaginably huge sun, Paradyce II, and the war, where right at that moment millions of men and women fought desperately for their lives. All contained in a dot on the

black. Out there, the crusade, the Imperium, the Rift… It all seemed of such little consequence when set against infinity. And yet it was everything. She was fighting against that. Not only mankind's enemies, but its ultimate insignificance.

She shuddered.

Eleven of Fleet Tertius' sixteen battle groups were stationed several hundred Solar distances from the system, where they were undetectable. The armada gathered there was staggeringly large, overkill in all but the direst circumstance. Yet, relative to the vastness of the cosmos, it was a speck of dust.

Some of the other officers were sceptical about their supposed invisibility, but Athagey believed it. The heavy silence of the deep void infiltrated the ship. She wasn't sure if this was her usual, pleasingly melancholic reaction to the wait before the fight, or the first touch of the stilling. Athagey had the lumens turned down, so the Dead End was as quiet and sombre as a tomb. She liked it that way; it made her feel like she floated on the brink of oblivion. She said she needed solitude to think, but she hadn't come up there to think. She'd gone there not to think.

The thoughts came whether she wanted them or not; it was always the way for her, in the long periods of quiet between battles. In those times, the buzz of self-recrimination took the place of the sound of guns. She wasn't good enough for her father. She hadn't been good enough for her suitor. She wasn't good enough for VanLeskus. She had no real friends. No bond-partner, no children – not that those things were easy for a captain to accommodate, and a shipmaster rarely saw their family if they had one, but they were expected. You were supposed to carry on your genetic line, a duty among all the other duties, to cement the glories of family, to carry on the story, and to provide more bodies for the Imperium's endless wars.

She stared at the distant star. That was where she wanted to be, fighting, doing what she was meant to do. Not waiting.

The vox-bead hidden in her rank pips vibrated on her neck. She reached up and touched it on.

'Athagey,' she said wearily.

'It's me. Finnula.'

Athagey heaved a sigh of relief. A little burp followed it.

‘Ah, come up to the Dead End and have a drink with me,’ Athagey said, cringing at the desperation in her voice, but she was sick of her own company. ‘There’s not much else to do.’

‘There is plenty to do, and I’m doing it,’ said Diomed sharply. Then she added more gently, *‘I didn’t want to bother you, but you need warning. VanLeskus is coming. You don’t have long before she gets there.’*

Athagey sat up suddenly, swinging her feet back to the floor and sending a small wave of her drink up the side of her glass. A drop of liquor hit the shiny wooden tabletop and spread.

‘Now? When’s she docking?’

‘She’s already on board. We were given strict instructions not to warn you. I’ve had to enact a cypher code on this channel.’

‘Then where by the Throne is she?’ Athagey looked about wildly, half-expecting the fleetmistress to stand up from behind one of the other chairs, having been there all along, sneering at her mood.

‘You’ve got minutes at the most…’

The door rolled aside. None of the usual alerts sounded. Of course, VanLeskus had the highest security rating in the entire fleet. She was suddenly there, filling more space than she had any right to fill, tall and gangly, knotted up with her immense, unfeminine strength. For once, she was dressed down. She wore a sober blue Navy uniform, with few adornments besides rich gold epaulettes and high collars. An ornate bar proclaiming her rank sat above her left breast. Round her neck was some sort of miniature sword on a chain, some keepsake from her earlier life as a general, Athagey thought. Soft grey leather gloves covered each hand. It was unostentatious, in a calculated way.

The fleetmistress attempted a smile. Emperor alive, it looked like she was being strangled.

‘Good evening, Groupmistress Athagey.’

‘Thanks for the warning, Finnula,’ Athagey murmured, and keyed off her vox-bead.

‘Is it usual for you, this sort of thing?’ VanLeskus asked. She nodded at the drink, then looked around the room. A brisk appraisal, as if she was a Munitorum officer assessing a requisitioned building.

‘Not really.’

‘I heard you drank a lot,’ said VanLeskus.

‘I do,’ said Athagey, and drank her drink pointedly. ‘Usually, I don’t have company.’

‘I see. Well, now you have, Groupmistress Athagey.’

‘Indeed I do. And to what do I owe the pleasure of that company?’ Athagey turned in her seat and returned VanLeskus’ smile with one that was altogether more poisonous. The fleetmistress ignored it, and looked at the statue of the saint.

‘Strange, to have a warship named after a saint more associated with peaceful acts.’

‘Maybe she was a real shit-kicker in her down time,’ Athagey said. ‘Maybe they just ran out of names.’ She hooked the decanter, pulled it towards her and filled her glass right up.

VanLeskus turned her tight smile back upon her. The smile had changed since she had come in. It had a faintly nightmarish quality. For a moment Athagey wondered if she were not asleep, and this was a dream.

VanLeskus’ remaining human eye was as hard as her augmetic. ‘You do not like me much, do you?’

Athagey snorted. ‘You got my subtle hints? I can’t stand you. Never been able to, never will be able to.’

‘That’s dangerously honest.’

Athagey shrugged. ‘From where I’m sitting, the feeling appears to be entirely mutual.’

‘You’re also drunk.’

‘Yes, I am,’ said Athagey. ‘But we could all die tomorrow, as my father used to say.’

‘Ah. Yes. He was military man wasn’t he?’ said VanLeskus.

‘He was. He was reckless, then he died.’ Athagey took a huge, deliberate gulp, and gasped with exaggerated satisfaction. ‘So, fleetmistress, do you want to summon my armsmen? Have them cart me off to the penitential deck where I might calm myself and reflect upon my poor behaviour?’

‘No. I am not going to do that,’ said VanLeskus. ‘I’m going to join you.’

She moved past Athagey. Athagey woozily turned to watch her. VanLeskus bent that ridiculously tall body in half so she could pick up the decanter off the table. She lifted it to her face and peered into it, putting it between herself and the groupmistress for a moment. Her face distorted.

She looks more human that way, Athagey thought and only just managed to stop herself from saying so aloud. She was drunk, but not suicidally so. VanLeskus was an awkward-looking woman. A hawkish face, nose long and slightly crooked, hips thin. Her hands and feet were large. It was like she was made up from spare parts that didn't quite fit together.

'What is this?' VanLeskus asked.

'Iaxian eskerwine, though it's not a wine,' said Athagey. 'More like a highly efficient solvent.'

'Oh?'

'Yes. It's highly efficient at dissolving reality.'

VanLeskus took out the stopper of the decanter and sniffed. 'What an interesting bouquet.' She sniffed again. 'A little sweet, I'd say. I prefer a good amasec myself.'

Athagey made a derisive noise. 'Such a cliché you are. One million worlds in the Imperium of Man, each with a whole cabinet of oblivions to blot out the horrors of our existence, and it's always amasec with you highborns and everyone who wants to emulate them.'

'Well, don't let it be said I won't try anything new.' VanLeskus moved to Athagey's side. She lifted the decanter. The flared lip clinked on Athagey's glass. She raised an eyebrow at Athagey. Athagey nodded her assent.

VanLeskus poured expertly.

'Don't you try to put distance between you and I, Eloise,' she scolded. 'You are a highborn like me. You would not have a Naval commission if you were not.'

'I could have proven myself in battle. Clawed my way up through the ranks. I could be a progenium brat, raised to the role.'

VanLeskus snorted. 'I know for a fact you are an admiral's daughter, himself the scion of the fourteenth richest noble house on Armageddon. Don't try to deceive me, madam.' She stopped pouring before the liquid overtopped the rim, turning it carefully, not spilling a drop. Then she dextrously plucked up a glass and served herself a generous measure.

'Doesn't seem fair, really,' said Athagey. She raised a little salute with her drink, and took another gulp. She had decided it wasn't a night for sipping. 'What makes me better than those drudges down below, living out their lives in the dark?'

VanLeskus sat down. *Of course, she takes the bloody chair at the head of the table without batting an eyelid*, thought Athagey, but she had to fold herself into it, she was so bloody tall, and that spoiled her very strictly controlled projection of gravitas enough that Athagey openly smirked.

‘Everyone must serve the best they can.’

‘It’s a little easier to serve if you live in a palace and get to drink things like this.’

‘You sound like Lord Lieutenant Messinius.’

‘He and I have a great many things in common,’ Athagey said.

‘I would have thought you’d find him boring.’

‘He is boring,’ she said, and contemplated her drink. ‘But I still like him.’

VanLeskus nodded, as if that made sense.

‘Your good health,’ said VanLeskus.

‘Yours too. May the Emperor bless you and all your endeavours.’

They drank. VanLeskus sipped her drink, then looked at how Athagey was drinking and how much she obviously had drunk, and took a more substantial mouthful. There was a moment’s awkward silence, then she downed the lot and poured some more.

‘Do you have children, fleetmistress?’ Athagey asked.

‘Yes,’ VanLeskus said. ‘Three actually. Well, there will be three. The latest is growing in the gene-vats of my family seat.’

‘They’re not with you?’

VanLeskus smiled in a way that managed to be patronising without completely hiding the sadness beneath. ‘They are being raised by my family’s retainers. I hope to meet them one day,’ she said with heavy irony.

‘No easy thing being a mother and a leader,’ Athagey said. ‘Are they your husband’s?’

‘He provided the necessary materials, yes,’ said VanLeskus. ‘It was a part of our marriage contract.’

‘You’re lucky to have him accompany you, at least,’ Athagey said impishly. ‘Though he doesn’t seem your type.’

‘There are duties beyond those to the Emperor,’ VanLeskus said. ‘Those to house, to world, and to alliances must also be fulfilled. He was a good match. He brought a substantial interest in the Vodine Naval Chandlery under the control of the Markha-Gher Combine. He is heir to one of the biggest manufacturing combines in my system, supplying vessels from all

across the segmentum. He has links to three forge worlds, invaluable in itself.'

'So you married to make your family richer.'

'Why else would I? People like us don't get to marry for love, Athagey. That's a child's notion.' VanLeskus drank her drink in three quick swallows, each one making her wince. The sapphire glass of her augmetic seemed more obvious nested in wrinkles. She reached for the decanter. She didn't need to get up, just lean forward a bit in the shipmaster's chair. Her long arm unfolded and grasped the vessel from all the way up there.

'Could I ask you why you are here?' Athagey said. 'You don't like me, I don't like you. You've hundreds of other ship's captains you could be socialising with. Why did you come here?'

VanLeskus poured herself some more eskerwine. 'I don't like you. You are right. You don't like me. Fine. But I hazard to say that the reason we do not like each other is that we are alike,' said VanLeskus. 'I thought it might do us some good to clear the air.'

Athagey gave a short, dismissive laugh. 'Have you been speaking to Diomed? She always says that we are the same.'

'Seeing as we are alike,' VanLeskus continued, 'I guessed you like delay about as much as I do, and lo and behold, I arrive here to find you brooding. I knew you would be. My lieutenants think I came here on a whim, but I am an exceptionally good judge of character. It's why I win so many battles.'

'You are a modest woman,' said Athagey.

'So are you,' VanLeskus retorted. 'You understand, despite your hostility to me, and your sarcasm. Paradyce is waiting for you and me to go in and save it from the abominable machines of the necrons.' She stopped speaking, so Athagey looked at her, only to find her expression a little unsure. Athagey sat back a little. She had not expected to find any sort of vulnerability in this woman, and yet there it was.

'I think of those people, fighting down there, frightened, sure they are going to die, assaulted by millions of xenos, looking to the heavens and praying that the Emperor will come, and finding no salvation. I wish I could let them know that we are here, and that their salvation is at hand. I wish we could move now, rain destruction upon these creatures and save millions of Imperial servants from death, women and men who could go on to fight elsewhere for the Emperor.' She stopped, and looked into her drink. 'But

here we are. Strategy demands we must wait. Untold numbers of people will die because of that.'

'You do not agree with the primarch's plan?'

'I do,' said VanLeskus. 'It is the only sensible course of action. That does not stop me wishing it could be another way. You?'

'If we could be closer and be sure to avoid detection and still receive the order to attack, then I would be happier, yes.'

'You find it frustrating, don't you?' VanLeskus said.

Athagey nodded.

'You care. I know. It may look like I do not care. Human beings are not tools to me. There are better motivations to my actions than glory.'

'That's the big one, though, eh?' Athagey said. She smiled, a little grimly, but there was warmth in it. 'The glory. That's what drives you on.'

'Is that what you really think of me?' said VanLeskus drily. 'I did not leave Vodine Sergastae and my ancestral office lightly. I did not fight to raise ships and men and push for Terra only to seek the primarch's favour. I went because the Emperor demands it. I'm very good at what I do. I know I am. I am good politically, I am excellent in battle, I succeed where others fail. Is it my fault if the Emperor made me to be exceptional? No. You might think me arrogant–'

'You are arrogant,' Athagey interrupted.

'As are you, otherwise I would not vex you so,' VanLeskus said. She drained her glass again. 'I know my strengths. I would be at fault if I stepped back from my gifts, for fear of provoking scorn from people like you,' she continued, and for the first time since she had entered the room she showed a little annoyance at Athagey. 'Then I would be failing in my duty. You neglect yours, with your insecurities, and your reliance on… stimulations.'

Athagey moved back a little. VanLeskus leaned in.

'It is widely known.'

'I was not going to deny it,' Athagey said.

'You should have more faith in yourself, Athagey. You and I, we have great ability. We are needed. We do not have space for doubt, insecurity, or incompetence. You are a good commander, but you will never be a great one if you do not have confidence in your own abilities.'

'Great like you?' said Athagey.

That exasperated VanLeskus. ‘Duty is the most important thing to me, not glory.’

‘I prefer glory,’ said Athagey.

‘Then perhaps we are different,’ said VanLeskus.

Athagey shrugged. ‘Maybe.’ She spun her glass around on the table. ‘Is that why you posted me to deal with the insurrections in the Segmentum Solar while you were gallivanting forward, because you do not think I am a great commander, or were you just jealous?’

‘Is that how you see it?’

Athagey opened her mouth to speak, stopped herself, then changed her mind. She would be honest. ‘Yes, actually. That’s exactly how I see it.’

VanLeskus sighed. ‘I expected you would.’ She thought a moment. ‘Consider this instead. The insurrections in the Segmentum Solar were provoked by the Word Bearers, one of the Traitor Legions. Transhumans who were granted unimaginable power by the Emperor, only to turn their back on Him and pledge themselves to gods who give them even more power. They have waged war upon the Imperium since it was born, their masters are monsters who strike fear into every man who hears their name. These great foes of our species threatened the heartlands of the Imperium, the worlds closest to Holy Terra and Mars. This threat emerged suddenly. We required good commanders.’ She paused. ‘We required *brilliant* commanders to deal with it. That is why I sent you.’

‘I’m brilliant, then?’

‘Flashes of brilliance, let’s not get too excited.’ She was getting drunk herself.

‘So you gave me a groxdung job for being good at what I do. That’s a generous interpretation of your actions.’ Athagey slugged her drink back, and held out the glass. VanLeskus filled it. ‘Let me give you another. You needed people to fix a problem. Some of us needed to be competent. Not all of us were, if we’re going to be completely honest, otherwise Battle Group Iolus would not have been so badly mauled it needed folding into Battle Group Saint Aster, costing me my name and my honour roll.’

‘Really, Athagey, you are too petulant about that. You kept both honour–’

‘If we are being open with each other, then you will allow me to finish, madam fleetmistress,’ Athagey said.

VanLeskus' mouth hung open. She shut it with a click. 'Very well. You may finish, though perhaps you might consider your tone.'

'I threaten you. I'm too much like you. You're better than me. I know it. It eats at me inside, but you are better than me. I salute you, not because I have to, but out of respect.' She raised her glass in a half-ironic toast. 'But you, fleetmistress, you cannot abide to have another who shines even half as much as you do. I remember people like you from the scholam, who would attempt to destroy those they thought good lest their own perfect talents be a little less well thought of. You're an egoist, and you're a bully. I've seen it on the face of those sycophants you surround yourself with, all of them coo-coo-cooing for your attention like idiot birds shitting on a hive spire. I saw it on the face of your husband.'

VanLeskus gave her a long, hard stare. Her grip tightened on her drink. For a second, Athagey thought she might have gone too far.

She spoke tightly, lips hardly parting. 'Do we have to resort to personal attacks? If you wish, I could give you a little speech about how you are viewed around the fleet because of your erratic behaviour and constant need for affirmation. Shall we do that?'

Athagey shrugged. 'If that is your will.'

'Or,' said VanLeskus, her voice softening, 'shall we save our aggression for the enemy? Emperor knows there are enough of them. We should not fight ourselves.'

Athagey lifted her eyes back to the viewing pane. Something struck her. A smile spread slowly across her face. 'Emperor help them if we can stop squabbling.'

Often VanLeskus affected a light and careless manner, though there was always a steel edge to it, a sword blade draped in bright silks. She attempted none of that now, and another second passed where Athagey thought VanLeskus might call for her to be arrested, then her face relaxed, and she smiled – not widely, but she did smile – and it was the most genuine smile Athagey had ever seen on VanLeskus' face.

'Emperor help them indeed.'

VanLeskus raised her glass at the viewing pane. 'To the women and men of Paradyce. May they fight well enough to be saved.'

Athagey raised her glass. 'To Paradyce.'

They both drank. When Athagey downed hers, VanLeskus did the same. This time, when Athagey poured, she filled the glasses to the meniscus.

‘There will be glory,’ Athagey said. ‘Whoever liberates the Nephilim Sector will stand to gain much in power, influence and riches.’

‘They will,’ said VanLeskus. ‘But I assure you there will be enough for both of us.’

Athagey nodded round a mouthful of the spirit. She was feeling it now, moving past the high and woozy stage to the genuinely intoxicated. ‘So in that case, I beg a favour of you.’

‘Which is?’ VanLeskus asked.

‘Do not send me away again. Let me fight alongside you. Your victories so far have been impressive, the ones you will win with me shall be even better.’

‘Now those sound more like the words of an excellent commander,’ said VanLeskus. She raised her glass. Athagey touched hers to it.

‘Truce?’ said VanLeskus.

‘Truce,’ said Athagey.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

GREYSHIELDS NO MORE

BROTHERS

WHITE CONSULS

Three days before the planetary assault, Messinius ordered the last Space Marines under his command to attend him in the ship's grand hangar. Once, to gather all his Unnumbered Sons like that would have been impossible. Thousands then had waited upon his words, all of them gone into new fellowships or joining the existing Chapters of the Adeptus Astartes. No few had perished in the crusade, slain defending the Imperium of Man from its numberless foes.

He had told them to attend in their full armour. He watched from a service gantry over an empty landing pad. The Space Marines entered in ordered files of blue ceramite. The damage from their most recent battles had been repaired, and their liveries repainted, so they seemed as new as they had the day Belisarius Cawl unleashed them on the galaxy. Four hundred and twenty-six Space Marines, all blessed with the primarch's gene-seed.

Through them, Messinius' Chapter would rise to fight again.

They lined up in silence. Not a warrior was out of place. They guessed something important was afoot. They appeared to Messinius like automata. Long-established Chapters of Space Marines had a less uniform look. Their

armour was decorated with marks of honour; artificer-crafted plates replaced standard-issue pieces; older marks of wargear were worn alongside the newer. Not so with Cawl's creations. They were all the same.

That would change in time. Messinius resolved to make it so, to coax the individuals from these mass-produced saviours of humanity.

'Remove your helms,' he said. 'I wish to look upon you as men.'

They obeyed without question. A burst of short-lived hisses whispered across the ranks as void seals were disengaged. The Space Marines undid the clasps on their breathing masks, lifted their helms free from their heads in a single piece and tucked them under their arms.

Faces from dozens of worlds looked up at Messinius. Their skins were all of different hues. Their features were moulded by their homes, making them a host whose diversity exceeded that of Terra, and yet their similarities outweighed these petty differences. In the first instance was their common humanity, in the second, the stamp of Guilliman's gene-seed brought a familial resemblance to them: a highness of the nose, a thoughtfulness around the eyes, a resting expression that suggested a reflective spirit. Born of mothers scattered the breadth of the galaxy, the Emperor's gifts made them brothers.

Messinius savoured the sight a moment before beginning.

'My warriors. It has been my privilege to serve with you this last decade. Our duty is not done. We are soon to go into battle again, you and I, side by side as we have so many times before. Such is the primarch's trust in us, we have been handed a mission of great importance. In due course, I shall brief you upon our task.' He paused. Four hundred faces looked back. 'To discuss our mission is not why I have gathered you here. What I shall tell you is of greater importance.' He paused again, wondering if his pride was lost on the Primaris warriors. He hoped not. He wanted them to know how highly he regarded them. 'I must inform you that this time shall be the last this brotherhood takes to the field in its current form.'

There was a little movement at that, and he was glad to hear it. Some sterner members of the Adeptus Astartes would have taken it for ill-discipline, but he saw it as a sign he was speaking to a room full of thinking, independent men and not automata, and that they cared for their comrades. He reminded himself, not for the first time, that considered thought had taken the place of programmed responses. In some of them

flashes of true humanity had returned. Messinius saw that in their stances, the way their expressions flickered, the tiny movements they permitted themselves as they listened, and he felt hope.

‘You have fought proudly, and with a courage that I have seen rarely, even among the ranks of the Adeptus Astartes. You have proven yourselves against doubt and fear. You have proven wrong those who denounced your creation as a plot to wrest control of the Imperium from the most holy Emperor. You were taken from your families, across many centuries, and flung into a harsh future. You have lost brothers to war and reassignment. You have known little but battle ever since you were awoken, and you know that duty will fill your every waking moment until you die performing it. Yet every one of you has served without complaint, with your hearts and minds set only on your responsibility to your Emperor.’

Messinius leaned upon the railing. It creaked under his weight.

‘The primarch has set in motion plans to dissolve the Unnumbered Sons, lest your existence give his enemies within the government of Terra ammunition to cast at him, and distract him from his holy purpose.’

He let the news sink in.

‘But this brotherhood will endure. You are to give up your battle plate. When it is returned to you, you shall be Greyshields no more. The grey will be scrubbed clean. Your livery shall be pure. You shall become, fully and without reservation, my brothers all.’ His voice rose. He felt their excitement building. ‘You entered this hall as Unnumbered Sons of Roboute Guilliman, yet you shall depart as White Consuls for now and forevermore, and together we shall continue to serve the Emperor, and His most sainted son, the Returned Primarch Roboute Guilliman. In their names I raise my toast. In their names I pledge myself to them and to you! You are White Consuls, and my brothers all, unto death!’

The Unnumbered Sons, White Consuls now, looked to each other. The first to raise his fist in salute was a man named Taurinius.

‘White Consuls!’ he shouted. ‘Lord Lieutenant Messinius! Unto death! Unto death! Unto death!’

Others took up his chanting, raising their fists.

‘Unto death! Unto death! Unto death!’

Messinius gave a signal, and artisans came in, hundreds of them in groups, each group pushing an armoury stand, and on each armoury stand was a

name plate, one for every man in the hall.

‘Give up your arms, my brothers,’ Messinius shouted into the chanting. ‘Give up your arms to these new servants of ours to be remade and be reborn!’

‘Unto death! Unto death! Unto death!’

As the war cry of the White Consuls rang in his ears for the first time in over a decade, Messinius experienced a moment of trepidation, a sense that he was leading his newly made brothers straight to their doom.

The war cry ceased. The first of the armoury tools whined. Menials took away armour plates with hushed reverence. Efficiency reigned, and Messinius went down among the White Consuls to speak with them individually.

That night, clad in white, they feasted.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

FLEETMASTER

PLAIN SAILING

BEGINNING

Isaiah Khestrin smoothed back his dark hair, the familiar feel of the oil in it calming his thoughts. When he was done, he wiped his hands on a spotless handkerchief, then tugged his tunic straight. He was a tall man, with a bladed nose and thoughtful eyes, full lips, and dark skin. He had been thought handsome, back home. His servant hovered nearby with a tray and a glass of good wine. Khestrin ignored him, for the moment. He wanted to be sharp. He also ignored Maldovar Colquan, who Khestrin suspected had been sent down here to keep him away from the primarch. Khestrin couldn't blame Guilliman. Colquan had an overpowering, violent energy that flooded whatever space he occupied. Khestrin dearly wished he could tell Colquan to go away too, but though he was fleetmaster of Fleet Primus, and therefore one of the most powerful men in the Imperium, he was still a man. Colquan was one of the Emperor's own guardians. Technically, he supposed, he could command him, because technically, Colquan was a part of the fleet. Khestrin was no coward, but frankly he did not relish the thought of exerting his authority over a Custodian.

He was in the lower strategium above the command deck, in his station atop a small hillock of machines and staff that made up his immediate domain. Behind him, the strategium inferior rose steeply up the Grand Strategium's bridge entrance. Between his position and the doors, hundreds of people occupied command stations like a colony of avians. Hololiths and screens glowed all around. For the moment, they were empty of information but active, waiting to receive input from the battlesphere. Nearby were various lords and ladies of mankind, some members of the Council Exterra who did not have command duties of their own elsewhere. Various specialised councils gathered in huddles of expertise. Even that accursed xenos was there, lurking about.

On the bow-fronted balcony looking over the command deck, he watched the crew of the *Dawn of Fire* labour to bring the ship from the warp. Guilliman was down there among them, staring at the shuttered oculus, a brilliant chip of cobalt and gold. He preferred to see with his own eyes, Guilliman said. He would wait until they were out of the warp and view the situation in the stars before ascending to the command levels. That had been the primarch's habit since the crusade began. He was a creature of habit, Khestrin thought. Guilliman's predictability still surprised him. He was anything but predictable in battle, capable of leaps of logic and tactics few baseline humans could ever conceive of, but in his personal tastes, in his routines, the primarch never deviated.

For all the awe he inspired, and once you got over the fact he was the Emperor's own son, Guilliman was remarkably human, Khestrin thought.

The fleetmaster had his own habits, and he indulged them. He let his attention wander over the strategium inferior and the command deck, warming up his strategic senses before the battle began through the act of small observations. Small observations in the heat of battle were the difference between victory and defeat. It paid to practise the technique of seeing without seeking, so he let his eyes choose what he saw. There was a man in one of the enginarium pits who was flustered. Recently promoted, Khestrin thought, and fearful of failing to meet the standard expected. He watched cyber-constructs on their endless patrols of the high ceilings. An ensign ran across the deck towards Shipmaster Brahe's throne, studiously ignoring the primarch nearby, though his terror was evident for all to see. He watched the machine-priests go from device to device and solemnly

bless them, doing so quietly, to avoid disturbing the crew and drawing Guilliman's attention.

Khestrin had spent his life in space. He was a ship's captain, an officer before that. His whole existence was tied up with void ships and their sailing, as was the existence of his whole family, back for generations so numerous that their line faded out of the records sometime in the middle of M36. The first mention of the name 'Khestrin' was in an incomplete family tree on a mildewed scrap of parchment, and he was marked as a shipmaster and a nobleman. Every one of his forebears since had been the same. Here, in the void, he was at home.

He let his vision drift upwards. The lower strategium was close to the level of the command deck ceiling. Up so high, details of the decoration on the vaulting were clearly visible. There were dirt-encrusted saints, struts carved with half-forgotten heroes, a mural of the Emperor in combat with the fiends of the great Heresy War. A wooden statue of a past shipmaster, its eyes of polished ceramic still eerily bright in a face grey with dust, peeked curiously at him. There were machines at work, servitor drones clearing away the swags of filth that collected around the atmospheric vents, roosting servo-skulls of obscure purpose waiting to be called to action. Small signs of the animals that made their home amid humanity's works, and the telltale colours of algae staining mosaics and paintings, infiltrated into the fabric of the vessel. There could be hundreds of such species on a voidship. Over centuries they adapted, competed, and changed, until each vessel hosted unique strains of life. A biological fingerprint. Equally unique was the ship's voice. Every hum of the systems Khestrin accounted for, analysed, stored away. The noise was so unusually gentle he hardly noticed it until he concentrated upon it, whereupon the murmur of atmospheric exchangers, the clatter of cogitators, and the hum of machine spirits became clear to him.

'Strange,' Khestrin said to Colquan. 'The ship is so quiet. The warp is so calm.'

'The primarch says it was once always thus,' said the Custodian.

Khestrin nodded. 'So he has told me. Throughout the crusade the Emperor has quietened storms wherever the primarch goes, but this is something else.'

‘The machinations of aliens, lord fleetmaster,’ said Colquan. He took a heavy step forward, reminding Khestrin how much bigger than him the Custodian was. ‘Try not to be too enamoured of it. These xenos automata are as bad as the forces of Chaos in their way.’

‘I am not enamoured, lord Custodian. “Hate the xenos” is a creed I passionately believe in. They cannot be trusted.’ He let his eyes drift towards Natasé. If the farseer had heard, he showed no sign; his high-crested helm remained still. ‘Imagine if sailing the warp was so easy all the time. Retaking Sanctus would be done in a few years.’

‘The gates of hell have opened, and all the evils of the universe spill out. My advice to you would be not to waste your time wishing for what can never be.’

He’s testy as always, thought Khestrin.

‘My apologies.’ Khestrin gave a little bow. ‘Only the Emperor can shield us from the dark.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Colquan. ‘But you must do your part to shield Him in return.’

The vox hardline linked to the empyrical section of the bridge began to ring. One of Khestrin’s underlings picked up the handset and spoke a few quiet words.

‘We are to leave the warp?’ Khestrin asked.

‘Yes, fleetmaster, five minutes,’ the officer replied. She gave a crisp salute.

‘Strange,’ said Khestrin again. ‘So calm.’

People stirred themselves to activity. Quiet conversation was replaced by focused action. The noise level increased. An expectant tension took hold, half excitement, half fear.

‘Activate all datasplays if you would, please, Lieutenant Overforl,’ Khestrin said. The officer nodded, and passed on his command. Now machine spirits were waking everywhere, the dry heat of their running adding to the slight feverishness of the atmosphere.

Khestrin bent to the vox-thief that curved over his command station like a tall, bronze flower.

‘Officers of Fleet Primus.’ Khestrin’s voice sounded all through the strategium inferior. ‘Prepare for a little turbulence.’ They were due to emerge deeper in-system than was strictly safe.

The translation clarions blew. A formal, ship-wide announcement declared imminent translation. Priests sang psalms in praise of the Emperor, asking for His protection. Choirs of servitors began their own hymns, asking the same of the God of Machines. The two clashed with a painful discordancy. Peculiarly, Khestrin could hear both parts perfectly. Ordinarily, the groaning of tortured metal and the screaming of stressed mechanisms drowned all that out. Then there were the shouts of men and women on the verge of panic, the shrill alarms of machine spirits. This time, nothing. Not even the translation into Bane's Landing had been this smooth.

Unbelievably, the exit from the warp occurred almost without him noticing. The ship let out a gentle shudder. Then the translation klaxons shut off, and the shutters over the *Dawn of Fire*'s grand oculus opened panel by panel.

'Was that it?' said Khestrin.

'Incredible,' Colquan said. It was rare to see the Custodian surprised, but he was.

The move from the empyrean to the materium had been so smooth the ship had barely moved.

Hard starlight of the sort only ever experienced in the void flooded the deck. The sharp angle imposed on his view by the position of the strategium inferior restricted Khestrin's field of vision to that portion of the ship's spine immediately in front of the superstructure. It was so brightly lit the metal of the hull took on a peculiar, granular quality, as if the sun of Zeidos picked out not only every flaw in the vessel's construction, but every crystal in the metal itself. Screens and hololiths blinked on, a wave of activation that skipped up the steep well of the strategium inferior, until it was populated with miniature false worlds and stars, and faces shone moon-pale in their lights. Directly ahead of the *Dawn of Fire* was Mesmoch, a small black ball with a crescent of silver on the sunward face, edging across the blinding eye of the star. Any star was too bright to look at with unaided eyes. Rendered as a true-pict image, Zeidos appeared more as a glaring hole in the firmament than a physical orb of plasma.

Khestrin blinked after-images away. Datasplays across the strategium were adjusted. There were call-and-response chains on the command deck below as an order was given to veil the oculus. A comfortable gloom reasserted itself.

Khestrin examined their target. A terrestrial world, just under one terra mass. A good place to live, though the settlement it had had before the appearance of the anomaly had been minimal. Nobody lived there now. The necrons had seen to that.

The first battle had taken place several years ago, but there were still signs of it, if one knew how to look. As returns from near-space augur soaks came back to the ship's sensoria, they picked out debris clouds and metal glitter where Imperial ships had met their end, belts of fading radiation the echoes of their death screams.

There was no sign of the enemy he could see yet. That would not last.

He began giving orders. Minor adjustments to the sighting of their auspexes and auguries at first. This was another warm-up before the main event. Command was a rhythm, so best it started before the guns opened up. All of Battle Group Alpharis' combat strength was there. Three dozen capital vessels, hundreds of smaller craft. Battle Group Alpharis was capable of prosecuting a war across a front of multiple systems by itself, and there were two more battle groups inbound. Lord Guilliman wanted this world dead.

The battle group arranged itself into three rough divisions, two shallow curves with forward points that ranged far ahead of the main body. At their other end, the curves grew broader towards a centre held by a standard Naval wall formation of the heaviest capital ships. Tens of thousands of miles behind the wall was a second formation, a mix of carrier craft and heavy cruisers. This taurine formation was aeons old, the horns made up of fast-moving vessels whose role it was to embrace and outflank the enemy fleet, or, should that be impossible, draw off the enemy escorts and embroil them in skirmishes to prevent them spoiling the centre's advance. The wall allowed all forward firing weapons to fire on enemy ships during the approach, breaking them target by target. Ideally, the centre should then punch through the enemy, the individual ships spread, turn, and rake the foe with broadside fire. While this was going on, strike craft would be engaged in their own war. Once the wall had passed the enemy centre, a rearguard of heavy cruisers would protect the carriers from any counter-strike and deal killing blows to vessels crippled by the centre's first pass. They should provide enough of a distraction to allow the capital ships to turn, and perform a stern pass behind the enemy fleet and bring their broadside

weapons batteries to bear again, the second time at close range on their rear. It was a solid combat formation: flexible enough to change quickly, a strong opening attack, powerful mid-battle options and enough reserve assets to make it truly responsive. Combined with the other two battle groups making their way in-system, one heading directly for Mesmoch, the other ready to cover Alpharis' flanks, it should provide victory.

Only Khestrin had never engaged the necrons before. Nor had the primarch. The fleetmaster had spent much of the preceding few months reading everything he could about this worrying, emergent xenos strain. He had bypassed the usual propaganda, referred instead to works by the Inquisition, Adeptus Astartes and other, less dogmatic organisations. From them, he had learned their technology base was exceptionally high, their ships were fast, heavily armoured, and possessed powerful weaponry. The only factor in the Imperium's favour was the supposed rarity of the necrons' ships. *Supposed*, Khestrin insisted to himself. Here they were deep in the enemy's territory, a site of intense activity, and therefore rarity could not be relied upon. Some of the reports told of huge, battle-station-sized craft capable of impossible manoeuvres. In his estimation, Guilliman had chosen a good combat arrangement for most known circumstances. The problem was, the circumstances here were unknown.

A constant stream of people came in and out of the armoured doors to the Grand Strategium. On the command deck Brahe directed the ship. In the strategium inferior, Khestrin controlled the actions of Fleet Primus at Zeidos. But up there, other officers worked to coordinate Guilliman's ambitious multi-system strategy. A neatly layered command. Later Khestrin expected to be drawn into the higher-level strategies, when communications came in from Tertius and the rest. If their sendings got through the stilling.

A change in the quality of noise drew his attention to the strategium's principal gate. Voices hushed, became more intent. That happened when Guilliman arrived.

Khestrin looked up to see the primarch's huge, armoured body come through the door.

'Isaiah.'

Guilliman called out to Khestrin as he made his way across the deck. When the strategiums had been installed during the *Dawn of Fire*'s refit,

they had been designed with Guilliman's bulk in mind. Still, the ways seemed uncomfortably small for him to traverse.

'My lord. We arrived smoothly.'

Guilliman mounted steps up to Khestrin's position. Khestrin could have sworn he felt the whole structure move under his weight.

'Perhaps I should have pushed our ingress deeper into the system,' the primarch said when he joined Khestrin and Colquan on the fleetmaster's stage.

'I still say the second gravipause here is too close to the fourth world.' Khestrin gestured at a gravimetric reader spewing a long tongue of paper. 'Initial soundings seem to bear that out. Range to target is four solar units,' said Khestrin, citing the ancient measure of the average distance from Terra to Sol. 'We are well within the bounds of the inner gas giants. I would say that gained us more than enough time. Battle Groups Betaris and Gammaris should be arriving at the Mandeville limit as per your plans, my lord. The question is, do we hold for confirmation of their arrival, or do we push on immediately and trust they will arrive on schedule?'

'They will arrive when expected,' Guilliman said. 'We move now. You will command our advance to be deliberately ragged across the three groups. Make us look uncoordinated. Convince the necrons that we are the primitives they believe us to be. Once they arrive, have Betaris delay by ninety minutes before moving. Have Gammaris advance in disrupted order until it is within one solar unit of Mesmoch. Order Alpharis to engage realspace engines at full power. We move on Mesmoch immediately. Let us make some noise.'

'Yes, my lord,' said Khestrin.

'I am going to the Grand Strategium. We will consult later. For now, remain watchful. You have command of the system battlesphere.'

'Yes, lord regent.'

Guilliman gestured at Colquan. 'I shall take the tribune here with me, it should help you concentrate a little better. You too, farseer. I value your guidance, but it is not politic to have you on deck so openly.'

Guilliman, the alien and the Custodian left, almost like the beginning of some sort of barracks-room jest, thought Khestrin. He went to his communications desk to address the officers there.

'Contact the astropathicum. Send the signals. The attack begins now.'

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

PARADYCE

ENGAGEMENT

TOO SOON FOR VICTORY

‘All squadrons to concentrate fire on that cruiser now!’ VanLeskus screamed.

Paradyce II was so close she felt she could touch it. In the way were necron warships, large, dangerous-looking things composed of crescents and pyramids and angular hulls, pulling off manoeuvres that the Imperial vessels could not hope to match.

Ships from her own battle group passed either side of the ship in lines. Broadsides puffed short-lived flickers of fire into the endless, airless night of the void. Hundreds of shells sped across the dark towards the necron ship. They hit its alien shielding, causing it to throb with strange lights. They only seemed to come into existence at the exact moment of impact, as evidenced by bizarre energy spikes that sent the *Precept Magnificat*’s auguries into warbling choruses of consternation.

The enemy vessel had other defences, speed being one. Such manoeuvrability took VanLeskus’ breath away, as the ship went from near stationary to speeding from the planet it had been bombarding without seeming to accelerate. It was blasphemous to think it, but even the wildest

zealot would have to admit to the mismatch in capability between Imperial and necron craft.

Nevertheless, there was an Imperial answer to so-called xenos superiority, and that was overwhelming firepower.

‘Do not let it get away! Destroy it! If it dematerialises before it detonates I’ll have your heads!’ she demanded, pounding the rail at the fore of her command pulpit. She had seen that too for the first time, not hours before. She’d not credited the idea when she read it in her briefings, but there it was, the damn things just *vanished.*

‘It’s coming right at us!’ one of the augury officers yelled, though VanLeskus didn’t need any technology to see that. The ship had turned on a pin and was now growing huge in the oculus.

Panicked demands for lance-locks were shouted out. The great turrets gave fire, sending the weird shielding into spasming shimmers of green. The necron cruiser shot back; strange, pronged weapons in ball-socket turrets spewing emerald lightning at the flagship. The void shield envelope responded violently, burning purple and blue as it spread the beams into blinding arcs of viridian, then the enemy ship was gone, hurtling over the command structure within handspans, causing many on the command deck to involuntarily duck. Strangely, its drives produced no backwash of energy, nor did its mass passing so close disturb the flagship. It was like fighting a ghost.

VanLeskus had not ducked. She was not perturbed by its phantasmal behaviour either.

‘Battle Group Sentimus, bring it down!’ she cried savagely.

She had a cartolith of the battlesphere active upon her platform in the centre of the command deck. Paradyce II was a large sphere that dominated half the display. Icons denoting Imperial ships moved in neat formations of arrows. The necron ships, by contrast, were individual and spread thin. Though they moved with irksome ease and their weapons were frightening, they could not match the massed guns of Fleet Tertius.

‘You can’t just fly through a space full of ships, can you?’ VanLeskus said with a predatory grin. ‘You do have limits.’

Battle Group Sentimus moved in on its prey, lances already blazing. The alien craft deflected its path upward from the plane of the ecliptic where the Imperial Navy gathered, seeking to bypass its assailants by making an

almost perfect right-angled turn. VanLeskus bit her lip, then laughed as the ship failed to spot the swarm of torpedoes racing at it and flew straight into them. There was a flurry of pained screams from the machine spirits of the augury section as the alien's shields reacted, which abruptly ceased.

'Enemy shields are down!' shouted the Master Augurum triumphantly.

The ship's master ordered the directional jets fired, and the *Precept Magnificat* began its ponderous turn.

'Give me a true-pict hololith of the target,' VanLeskus commanded.

Her battlesphere map shrank in on itself. A new image took its place. The necron ship had been encircled by Fleet Tertius. Everywhere it went, munitions or ships waited for it. Lance beams scored its dark skin. Explosive shells burst around it. Solid-mass shot smashed into it. The metal re-formed itself with a hideous crawling motion, but it could not endure. Its armour was stripped away within seconds.

It began to shimmer with green dapples. A sure sign it was about to vanish.

'It's seconds away from withdrawing. Destroy it, destroy it now!' she yelled.

A warhead found its way inside the hull. There was a detonation that distorted the long tail section of the ship, followed by a secondary explosion that tore it apart end to end.

A huge cheer went up on the deck. That was the largest and the last necron ship in orbit around the primary world. The sickle-shaped fighters it had spewed out by the hundred remained a threat, but they were being dealt with like their parent vessel, by the stolid application of brute force.

Joyful orders were called across the deck to come back into formation, and to order in the landing ships. The *Precept Magnificat* finished its turn, bringing it side-on to the embattled world. VanLeskus watched the ongoing battle from orbit. Black scars on the ground, the ember-glow thin lines of fires viewed from far away, like flame slowly consuming paper, the shimmer of high-energy weapons ionising the clouds and causing storms around the battle zones. A flight of Naval Lightning fighters streaked across the middle of her view, three of the necron fighters chasing them. VanLeskus imagined the androids piloting them, exposed to the void, their death's heads fixed in perpetual leers.

A las-beam punched out from a frigate coming down behind the xenos, shattering a fighter. The other two were similarly despatched. The

Lightnings broke apart and peeled away on a new intercept course. In strike-fighter combat, there was no time to pause.

She commanded the cartolith be brought back to the fore of her personal display, rested her long chin in one hand while she examined it thoughtfully. Imperial troop ships were moving in, the grand cathedral landers of the Order of the Argent Shroud to the front, Astra Militarum mass-landers behind. The whole of Battle Group Lamdax had gone over to the Sisters, she'd heard, not long after she'd ordered them to reinforce at Gathalamor. Groupmaster Crinus had practically abdicated command to their canoness. It was a shocking break of protocol, the kind that usually ended in an executioner's bullet, and a dangerous overreach on the part of the Adeptus Ministorum. Yet the fleet's success had stopped VanLeskus from acting, and it was useful here in the nexus. It was held that faith broke the dullness of mind the xenos inflicted on humans. She was not sure she believed it. Either way, she won. If they all died then she regained control of the group, but she hoped it was true.

She could feel the dread influence of the xenos edifices herself. It was peculiar. Dullness was an appropriate word, but didn't fully capture it. She had a tight feeling in her mind. She felt tired, as though she had toiled hard for weeks with little rest, to the point where her soul was numb and her motivation for carrying on – living, even – was lessening. The effect was worse on the psykers. The astropaths and Navigators were ill, some were unresponsive, and they were only at the very edge of the Pariah Nexus. Having felt the bare beginnings of the effect, she revised down the chances of Kallides' survival.

The destruction of the necron vessel re-energised her crew. She wondered if the effects were more pronounced than they suspected. Three necron cruisers had been in orbit round this one world. It had taken the efforts of two battle groups, some twenty-three vessels, to destroy them all, and the first two had managed to escape simply by disappearing.

There were notifications of similar successes at Paradyce's other worlds. Deployment of ground troops was due to begin on several of them. It seemed clear cut. They outnumbered the foe here scores of times over. But for the first time in a long time, she was troubled. This was just the beginning.

No, she told herself, *I will not be celebrating victory just yet.*

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Chapter Thirty

ULTIMATUM

CAWL'S MONSTER

PLANETFALL

Messinius' White Consuls wore familiar white and blue, the colours of the Ultramarines reversed. They moved with purpose about the drop bay of the *Ultimatum*, taking equipment to the drop pods, checking ammunition, running pre-combat tests on their wargear. He had trained them well. Each Space Marine had a supplementary piece of equipment, an orb a little bigger than a krak grenade worn at the belt. They were of a dull, sinister-looking metal, bisected into equal parts by a shallow groove. From this shone the cold, green light Messinius had come to associate with necron technology. Space Marines were not above using xenos weaponry, it was a common practice among veterans of the Deathwatch, but relying on xenotech to mask themselves from the very creatures that made it gave him pause. He feared the devices could give the necrons access to their own technological systems. These xenos had a power over such things.

The *Ultimatum* was one of three cruisers Guilliman had assigned to the reborn Chapter. They were all the same pattern, sleek, fast, one of Cawl's new designs, its existence yet another proof of the archmagos' polymathy. Each had a broad embarkation deck with the capacity to deploy twelve drop

pods. The drop pods were locked into their transit cradles, the doors beneath them sealed against the void. Pipes pumping fuel leaked cold vapours that stung the nose with the scent of promethium. The pods' deployment cranes had been unbolted from the walls and moved into place, their hazard-striped arms waiting to clamp about the pods and lift them free of their cradles into the launch tubes. Baseline human deck crew worked alongside servitors to prepare the craft for the drop. A few of Cawl's tech-priests helped. Messinius' Techmarines went among them, only their pauldrons repainted with the colours of the White Consuls. The rest of their armour retained the rusty red of Mars.

The systems of the *Ultimatum* were more advanced than those Messinius was used to. It was quiet, clean and under normal circumstances bright, although currently only the emergency lumens were lit. The swift way everything powered up and worked made him ascribe a kind of hungry eagerness to its machine spirit.

They'd arrived well out from the system boundary and waited for the prearranged time before boosting their drives to full acceleration, then cutting the power. Since then they'd flown dark, their machinery powered down to minimal draw, reactors flickering just above the boundary of extinguishment. Everything depended on prepared flight paths, gravity braking, positioning. Timing was key. They were committed to a flypast of the necron world, whether Guilliman's signal came to drop or not.

'We are ready, lord lieutenant,' Thothven said.

He wore the heraldry of the Chapter's Tenth Captain, Messinius' old role. His armour's paint had a depth of translucency that gave it a pearlescent sheen. The insets of his pauldrons were the purest cobalt. Messinius thought he looked splendid, and in that exact moment he felt his last reservations about the Primaris Marines dissolve. The man before him was a Space Marine, pure and simple. He was his brother, and he was his friend. He felt a rush of emotion stronger than any he had experienced since before his apotheosis. Stronger even than the time he had first set eyes upon the primarch. The White Consuls would live again.

'Archmagos Cawl's equipment is loaded and ready to deploy,' Thothven continued. 'We are four hours out from the target. We await the signal to proceed with the mission.'

'You need wait no longer,' said a deep and dolorous voice.

Cawl’s massive servant lurched out of the shadows of the embarkation deck. Messinius’ hand flew to his bolt pistol. He’d had no idea the warrior had been there. Thothven took a step back, reaching for his own weapon.

Alpha Primus had no helm on. An expression of amused contempt crossed his scarred face. ‘I alarmed you.’

‘How did you get so close without us noticing?’ Messinius demanded. ‘You did the same to me before, years ago on the *Zar Quaesitor*.’

‘I recall,’ said Alpha Primus. ‘The day of the Primaris revelation. You were blind to me.’ He carried a superior air.

‘How do you do it?’

‘It is a gift,’ said Primus, though the way he said it sounded sarcastic. ‘One of many. We have received the signal. We are clear to approach.’

‘By what means?’ Thothven asked. ‘Another gift?’

‘If you like to call it so,’ said Primus. He looked over their heads; he was taller than them both. ‘Master,’ he shouted to Cawl. ‘It is time.’

The archmagos was fussing over something on the far side of the deck in his busy, energetic way. As soon as Primus called to him, he abandoned whatever he was doing to his coterie of servitors and scuttled over. In his panoply of war he was enormous. Two large energy weapons had been plugged into the sockets below his principal arms. Messinius was familiar with neither design. On Cawl’s back he carried some kind of field projector. Servo-skulls flocked around him. A small, hard-linked drone scurried in front of his foremost feet, dodging about as if it feared to be trodden on. In Cawl’s mechanical hand was a huge power axe. He was bigger and more dangerous-looking than the other times Messinius had seen him.

‘We have clearance to proceed,’ said Thothven to the archmagos. ‘According to your servant here.’ He looked up at the giant Space Marine with open suspicion. ‘Although we have no notification from the astropaths or our Librarians.’

‘No need, no need!’ said Cawl with an avuncular chuckle. ‘Primus is a potent psyker. It makes him rather useful on a jaunt such as this.’ He patted the huge Astartes on the vambrace, eliciting a scowl. ‘I can always rely on him to pick up on such things well before other psykers. Handy in these circumstances, eh? How are you feeling, my boy?’ he asked.

‘Dull,’ Primus said. ‘The message was faint. We are at the edge of the stilling zone, yet the aliens’ work weighs heavy on my soul. I feel weak.’

‘Well, well, it is to be expected,’ said Cawl thoughtfully. ‘It will be interesting to see what the effect is on you once we get down to the planet’s surface. I would brace yourself, my boy. I think this experience is going to be unpleasant, until I wrest control of their systems, of course, then I promise I will turn them off.’

‘He is coming with us?’ Messinius asked. The idea of the giant fighting alongside him was appalling.

‘Yes. Why wouldn’t he?’ said Cawl, genuinely puzzled. ‘Primus is one of my most potent assets. Don’t worry, his primary role is keeping me safe from harm. He won’t interfere with your work.’

Primus curled his lip at Messinius. ‘Do I offend you?’

Messinius scrutinised Primus’ heavyset, scarred features. He found little common feeling there. ‘I do not know. I do not know what you are, and that makes me uneasy.’

Primus gave a bitter smile that did not reach his eyes. ‘That makes two of us. It is my master’s wish that I accompany him, therefore I shall see you on the surface come what may.’ He turned his back, and walked away.

‘Don’t mind him,’ said Cawl brightly. ‘I made him perfect in every way, but neglected to make him cheerful while doing so. Something of an oversight on my part. He tends to grimness.’

‘His disposition is not what bothers me, archmagos,’ said Messinius.

Cawl’s many appendages executed a complicated shrug. ‘None of us are perfect. Your chameleon unit is working?’

Messinius looked down at the heavy alien bauble on his belt. ‘How do I tell?’

‘The light is green?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good. Then if nothing tries to kill you, we know it works!’ He smiled, his ancient eyes twinkling in a way that gave Messinius no confidence at all. ‘The real test will be in the field, no?’

Messinius stared at him for a long time. Cawl just kept on grinning. He would be happy when this mission was done.

‘Just keep your monster away from my men, archmagos. Thothven, give the order. We embark now.’

The deployment master’s voice was calm and crisp over the vox, if a little tinny. They were avoiding their squad vox-nets, relying on hardlines and internal voxmitters to avoid electromagnetic bleed that might alert the enemy, and the air in the pods was thin.

‘Prepare for planetary drop, my mark. Time to drop set at three minutes, twenty-two seconds. Initiating countdown.’

A chronometer appeared in the upper right of Messinius’ visual field. He used the motion of his eyes to minimise it, and to rearrange the tiny tactical read-outs detailing each of the men in his command squad. They were rendered as line graphics of armoured Space Marines. Each of them was currently green. His sensorium suite could connect him with any man in the force, should he wish. He ran through the vital signs of each of them before ordering a general shutdown of all equipment. He was not confident the Space Marines’ inter-squad datasphere was discreet enough to escape detection. Cawl’s followers had told him that his display may not function on the surface. They had told him that he might experience strange feedback, and attempts by the xenos to control his machine spirits. Or he might not. Already the chameleon unit was interfering with his armour systems. It wasn’t a good sign if their own camouflage was disruptive. There were too many uncertainties in this mission as it was.

His power pack whined. Most of the lights on his retinal display went out. A yellow light blinked in the bottom left of his view: minimal systems support only.

He felt his humours shift and the ship shook, bringing them into a stable orbit over Planet 7/2. Thrusters fired mercilessly hard. Inertia pushed at him. The drop pods rattled in their claws like bottles in crates. Messinius’ display blurred.

‘Planetary drop in two minutes, ten seconds. No signs of detection.’

Messinius grasped the guide stick mounted in front of him. The reason machine spirits usually did the work of piloting a pod down to the surface was that the forces involved were at the edge of even a Space Marine’s tolerance. But as Cawl had explained, every machine spirit employed on their mission increased their risk of detection. He activated the guidance program Cawl had put in his battle plate. It resembled a simple targeting reticule, numbers down the side, crosshairs in the middle. The numbers

were the more important part. They would dictate when he must fire the retro-rocket.

Messinius' organs shifted. The ship was decelerating to match the rotation of Planet 7/2. It had to come into geostationary anchor, or the drop pods would fall like scattered seeds behind it, leaving the strike force spread out and vulnerable. But slowing down so vigorously left them open to detection. If they were attacked before the pods were released, then the mission would be over before it began.

There were ten of them in the pod. Two of the pods on the cruiser carried Cawl's equipment with a single Space Marine as pilot, the rest one hundred newly christened White Consuls. Fifty more waited to descend by gunship in the second wave. One hundred and fifty seemed inadequate. It was often said five Space Marines could take a world. This wasn't entirely hyperbole. The arrival of the Adeptus Astartes could cow a mutinous population, but against a planet full of necrons, one of the most technologically sophisticated species humanity had encountered, a company and a half would not be enough.

There was a faint roar as the ship's belly kissed the atmosphere. The temperature crept up the tiniest amount. The drop pods shook harder. Messinius' retinal display was becoming unreadable. He made it larger. It didn't help much.

One last time, he checked over his weapons and armaments via his sensorium. A physical check was impossible while held tight in his restraint cradle. Outside, on the deck, huge fans kicked into action, quickly building to a momentous chop that sucked out the atmosphere. The few sounds coming through the drop pod's ceramite hull dwindled to nothing.

'Drop in thirty seconds. Deploying pods.'

There was the distant blare of klaxons. The thunk-clang of bay doors opening. Machines whined. The drop pods were extruded from the bottom of the ship by the heavy pistons of the cranes.

Messinius switched his sensorium's attention outward, activating several grainy thumbnail vid-images in his display; the ventral view of the ship from various angles where the bulbous undersides of the pods hung like fruit waiting to fall.

'Drop in ten seconds. Nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one…'

Messinius panted for the last seconds, employing his third lung to hyper-oxygenate his blood.

The moment the countdown stopped, the ship reached a geostationary anchor.

'Wave one alpha, away,' said the sergeant.

Every second pod was released.

The hull conveyed the noise of their departure, a machine bang when the retention claws opened, a short squeal of metal on metal as the pod slid out down the guide rails, the loud roar of the top jets firing once the upper jet was clear of the ship. They went off in sequence, six loud whooshes. They silenced themselves as soon as they began, as they moved off from the ship and into the near-void over the world, where no sound could pass. The ship shifted with the sudden loss of mass. Messinius watched the pods fall from the external auguries. Each one went free without incident, and vanished swiftly from his view.

Seven seconds had been set as the delay before releasing the second pod wave, to allow the first group to clear. They ticked by slowly.

'Wave one beta, prepare. Wave one beta, release.'

'May the Emperor watch over us as we go to do His duty,' Messinius said.

The bang this time was loud and close. They fell slowly at first, the drop pod easing down greased rollers. He waited for them to clear the crane, then fired the top jet. The gut-punch wallop of ignition accelerated them out and away from the ship. On Messinius' minimal displays, the huge block of the hull went from filling the world to a distant shape in half a second.

By machine illusion, the countdown floated some way in front of his face, forever out of reach. He rested his finger on the second trigger, the one that would fire the lower motor. If he mistimed it they would be smashed to pieces on alien stone. Messinius struggled to breathe. His internal organs pushed up into the fused box of his ribs and squashed his lungs flat. Even with the gifts of the Emperor that made their blood richer, their breath deeper, it was not unheard of for Space Marines to pass out during a drop. The acceleration provided by the top jet was punishing. Speed was a far better protection than any archeotech energy shield could be.

They hit the planet's thin atmosphere. A persistent roaring filled every part of Messinius' world. The ship shuddered, always seeming to be on the

verge of breaking up, never doing do, as it slipped about on the cushion of air compressed by the descent. The temperature rose.

The first countdown ceased. He released his forefinger from the top trigger. The top rocket motor went out. They were no longer accelerating. The drag of air slowed them. He kept his attention fixed on the last countdown, which raced towards zero as he raced towards the ground. The temperature climbed. His head was full of thunder. The shaking of the pod blurred his vision so much he was worried he would miss the signal to fire.

When the countdown hit zero, though his arm was hard to control under so much stress, Messinius squeezed the lower trigger immediately.

The engine fired. The pod bucked at the sudden, contrary force. Metal groaned. Engines howled. Drop pods were good for only a few drops before the engine shook its mountings to splinters.

The motor screamed. The pod slowed with punishing rapidity. Blood pushed into Messinius' skull and his vision crowded black.

Then the pod hit the ground with a noise like a dropped bell.

Explosive bolts on doors blew, and the doors slammed down, becoming ramps. A strong, flat light dazzled Messinius a microsecond before his helm adjusted. His power pack spooled up to full output. More charges blasted apart the restraint bar locking mechanism. Hydraulics under pressure the whole time were finally released, slamming the bar up. He shoved his way past the control panel, shattering it, and ran down the ramp, already unslinging his bolt rifle.

'Wide spread, defensive positions. Squad five, get to the unmanned pods.'

The pods had come down in a ragged cluster, the best result that could be hoped for. Messinius had been on drops where disorder reigned, and the craft were scattered far and wide. All around him, white-armoured bodies slammed into cover, hitting rocks or rises in the ground.

'Clear!' voices in his helm informed him. 'Clear!' That was all. Vox-chatter was kept to a deliberate minimum.

Specialists bearing augury equipment knelt to take readings. A minute passed, allowing Messinius his first opportunity to examine his surroundings. He walked forward a little, and saw they had come down on the lip of a plateau that ended on a shallow ridge before dropping down into a deep hollow that seemed quarried, rather than eroded. At the bottom was a complex of buildings.

The ground was of shattered stone of some soft sort, mixed in with sharp fragments of glassy noctilith. This made everything black. The sky was a dirty white that only made the blackness of the planet more profound. Huge, narrow pyramids towered upwards, their tops as high as mountain peaks and razor sharp. Long swarms of necron constructs flowed in and out of them, so distant and numerous they looked like smoke. Readings on atmospheric content said thin air, high carbon monoxide, heavy ionisation. The breath of machines.

He switched to external voxmitter.

‘Sergeant Artin, any sign of detection?’

‘None, lord lieutenant,’ the sergeant replied. He checked the wrist display of his infiltrator gear. ‘Cawl’s devices work.’

‘There must be millions of xenos constructs here,’ he said.

‘Billions, my lord.’

Messinius watched the clouds of machines passing back and forth between the giant pyramids. All it took was for one of them to identify the Space Marines as hostile, and their mission would fail spectacularly.

Pulsed data-blurt reports came in. The equipment had come down unharmed.

‘Get it established,’ he commanded. ‘The sooner we’re done here, the better.’

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Chapter Thirty-One

CATHEDRAL SHIP

XENOS

A WISH FOR COMMAND

Deafening peals of bells drowned out the sermons of the preachers at the front of the drop-cathedral. The vessel swayed. The men and women of the faithful staggered on their feet. Some of the people would not join the attack. There were broken bones. A few would be left as corpses upon the mosaic floors, trampled by their comrades in their ecstasies.

Metallic noises came from the rear of the ship – flak-fire hitting armour plate – but Shanni was unafraid.

'The Emperor protects,' she said to herself, and it was an utterance of absolute joy.

On gantries over the faithful the preachers paced, guarded by crusader warrior ascetics with tall shields and taller swords. Scented, blessed water rained down on her from on high, as soothing as the very tears of the Emperor. The roaring of descent increased. She felt a push from below. They were slowing. She elbowed the press of people aside so she could pull out her sword and raise it high. It should have felt heavy. It was bulky, poorly balanced, the power unit that drove the toothed track adding to the unwieldiness of it. She screamed out, warning the faithful to be ready, that

they were near, that the hour of the Emperor’s vengeance upon the xenos was at hand.

They did not hear her. They could not. Her words were swallowed whole by the furious noise of the descent. The bells tolled ever more wildly. Engines roared louder. The hollow bangs of impacts on the hull made their ears ring. Above her the priests continued to shout and pray, eyes wild, spittle flying, their gaping mouths as soundless as those of landed fish. All was lost to the din. They were each of them howling their devotions, every man and woman in the deployment hold, each caught up in their private ecstasies, each sure it would be they, no other, who would greet the Emperor first in victory.

There was a hideous noise, somewhere between a crackle and a buzz, then the squeal of tearing plasteel, the only thing she could hear over the tumult, and she saw a braided beam of cold green light punch through the floor.

The hymns stopped. The screaming began.

The beam tore through people like paper. They were stripped back layer by layer, as if peeled, each secret arrangement of flesh exposed to full view, though it took but an eye-blink before the effect concluded and the faithful were reduced to disassociated particles. A fine blood mist billowed everywhere. She breathed in copper and iron.

Air roared through the hole, roughening the descent. A jolt, and the ship listed a few degrees, enough to tip the faithful towards the drop. Those closest slipped on the slime that was all that remained of their brothers and sisters. She expected them to fall shrieking to their doom, but curiously they did not; they were thrown up in the air by the air blasting through the hole, tossed about like leaves in a gale.

Then came another spike of green fire, then another. The third ripped a hole in the ceiling. The wind howled in harder, swirled about, making gyres of atomised bodies. The cathedral, its integrity compromised, began to tip forward.

More roaring, more screams. The ship was falling, falling, bringing them to their deaths before they could serve their Emperor. Shanni gnashed her teeth with outrage.

She was praying, not for victory now, but simply for the chance to serve in battle, when the ship hit, hard. Her head snapped forward into the man before her. Her jaw clacked on her tongue, and her mouth flooded with

blood. The floor heaved into sudden pressure ridges as the crash-landing ship skidded over the ground. The crush swayed left, and right. Shanni gasped for air, half-choked on her own vitae. The press of the crowd was the only thing that kept her upright. A priest plummeted from the catwalks up in the vaulting, his screams terminated by the wet snap of broken bones that was somehow audible over the crash.

The vessel trembled, close to death, and came to a grinding, groaning halt.

There was a moment of dazed silence. Klaxons honked with unseemly urgency. The great doors at the prow shuddered. Gears ground. The hold was rank with the stink of hot metal and blood. The doors parted only a few feet, enough for the first of the faithful to thread the gap, running out, some screaming with holy fervour, some in blind terror. Then, with them all trying to exit at once, bodies stoppered the gap. The gates would open no further. One of the gearboxes controlling them burst. Shards of whistling metal cut through the faithful, unkind as cannon fire. A man-thick chain ran from the gearbox up into a covered mechanism at the top. This creaked under pressure from motors that would not give up trying to open, open, open the gates, until it finally snapped and whipped free as sure and final as a harvestman's scythe, killing scores.

Screams and song, praise and fear reverberated around the hold. The lumens went out. From outside came the steady *crump crump crump* of big guns, and the spine-chilling whoops of alien weaponry.

The crowd heaved back, like a wave cresting in the shallows, building itself up to crash down, then they surged forward. Shanni was carried along with it, at the front, not leading as she was accustomed to, but dragged along. People died ahead of her where they met unyielding metal and the air was squeezed out of them. The priests were shouting again.

Shanni's body was pinned. Her arm, somehow, was still aloft, trapped, and she gripped the chainsword hilt, not knowing what else she should do. Her forearm burned with the weight of it. The strength was being crushed from her muscles, as the breath was being forced from her lungs. She gasped in a last, thin lungful of air, far too little to nourish her body, and when she expelled it, she could not expand her chest again.

Her head buzzed. The world dimmed. The redoubt of her faith trembled. Was this the plan the Emperor had for her, to die uselessly here?

It was a fleeting moment of doubt she would never forgive herself for. Emergency failsafes buried in the doors kicked in. An intense heat washed over her as melta arrays activated. Molten metal dripped from the edges of the doors, searing unfortunates crushed up against them. There were a dozen bangs in quick succession, so close as to be nearly synchronous, then the doors yawned downward with deceptive slowness, and landed softly, soundlessly almost, not quite flat, the top angled unevenly towards a brilliant sky.

Light flooded the hold. The crowd stumbled forward, steadied itself, screamed hosannas and terrors in one ragged shout, and poured out as one. Shanni could not see the lip of the door, and when she hit it fell several feet to the floor. A soft body cushioned her fall, still alive, wriggling to get up. Something in it snapped. She barely stopped her ankle from turning itself, and scrambled away, before the next member of the faithful could crush her. Already, there were heaps of bodies at the edge of the ramp, some still weakly moving. The stink of burst bowels made her head spin.

It was a vision of hell, but she endured it for the Emperor. She dragged her weapons up with numbed arms, joined the ragged stream of survivors pouring on to the battlefield, and began to run.

There was worse waiting for her.

Drop-ships thundered down from the sky, carrying mismatched armies united only by faith. There were true warriors among them, at least three regiments of Astra Militarum swept up in the canoness' crusade, but the majority were people like Shanni, tens of thousands of mortal folk driven wild by loss and war. They had lost everything but belief.

They ran as a mob, a true horde. Thousands and thousands of zealots, their filthy clothes marked with the crudely daubed sign of the 'I', their flesh mortified to atone for their failures in service to Him. They had more weapons than before. Shanni would never know, but the lords of the fleet had seen utility in her kind, and diverted guns to supply them. Most of the faithful carried freshly stamped lasguns, though many still bore their own weapons, their makeshift maces and knives, blessed as they were by traitorous blood. Ships were landing all over the field. Shanni's ears throbbed painfully as a tank transporter came down to a perfect landing a hundred yards to the right, its thrusters immolating a hundred people running beneath. Four ramps slammed down at the front, disgorging

hulking war machines from each. They were immediately targeted. A fat stab of energy set one ablaze. The others accelerated and spread out, more following, the lead tanks already returning fire with their cannons. Columns of light blazed out of the heavens, each one accompanied by a clap of divine thunder and a breath of hot wind.

The Emperor's breath, she thought, *the Emperor's voice.*

The lances were targeted ahead, where the enemy were. The dropzone was some sort of alien fortification line, black and glassy and entirely sinister. There were gleaming energy fields over the ramparts that crackled and spat sparks where the lance fire contacted, and towers which issued braided beams of green energy. They hit the horde with an electric buzzing, and where there had been people, there was nothing but the red mist. Already it drifted in thick, repellent clouds over the battlefield. Shanni ran into a bank of it, and came out the other side painted in vitae like some backworld savage. Orbiting Imperial ships fired relentlessly, and the sky seemed to be held up by yards-wide pillars of laser light that shifted with every blink.

Shanni's ears hurt. Sounds were muffled. She spat blood from her mouth. Her tongue was still bleeding.

She had no idea where she was or on what kind of world. The ground was churned to mud that was hard to run over. There were human limbs and bits of machines mixed in with the dirt. The sky showed a few shreds of blue among the clouds of smoke, and she thought she could smell burning wood or grass, but neither of those things meant much to her. She was there solely to slay the foes of the Throne.

At least they were easy to distinguish from her own kind.

She saw the first one almost too late. A drop-ship on final approach was hit directly overhead, shedding wreckage and burning bodies as it yawed off to the east. She was transfixed by its death, following it as secondary explosions burst its port engines. If the Emperor hadn't been watching over her, she would have been dead, but He in His holy mercy drew her attention to something moving fast towards her at head height.

She thought at first it was an insect of some kind, though she realised quickly it was far too big. It was the size of a chair seat, silver, fat limbs beneath it, a single, glowing eye. Mandibles crackled with alien energies. She raised her pistol, and fired.

She did not believe in luck. She believed in Him. It was He who alerted her, He who guided her aim. Her single beam of pure blue light stabbed the thing in its doleful, single eye. The glass shattered, the beam cored the machine out, and it crashed down into the torn field by her feet. She stopped, stunned, looking at the alien machine, as people ran past her screaming their battle prayers. The machine was blocky, plain, wholly without beauty. Being near it made her skin crawl.

A harsh buzzing made her look up.

Thousands of the things were rushing at her in a swarm. They reminded her of the dray-flies of her home world.

Shanni had not thought of home in a long time.

Where the wave of machines passed, people died. She could not tell by what process – some hideous xenos magic. They dropped, skin flayed off, muscles flensed, some reduced to gory, incomplete skeletons. Their weapons were similarly eroded. Chewed, she thought dumbly. She raised her gun, she raised her sword. It would do no good. The machines were coming for her, and she was going to die.

Once more the Emperor showed her His protection. Shimmering air whooshed either side of her, bracketing her with walls of heat that scalded her skin. The rattle of automatic gunfire followed. The machines were not able to arrest their progress, but flew into the heat, and exploded. More fires, more lights, more bullets, came on every side of her. The growl of engines shook the universe.

Tanks.

A muted voice was shouting, hardly audible over the tanks' engines.

'Clear the way! Clear the way! By the Emperor, move!'

A huge tank reared behind her. She stood directly in its path. A man in a peaked cap waved at her frantically from the turret. Another man stood behind him, playing a stubber back and forth.

'Move!' the officer shouted. She glimpsed his despair. He did not wish to crush her, but he would if she did not move. She threw herself to the side. The tank passed within feet of her. The fusion guns mounted in its sponsons fired again, so close that the skin on her face blistered. She threw up her arm to protect herself.

The tanks moved on. Four of them in loose formation, burning the insectile xeno-machines from the air, and lobbing shells towards the alien

fortress. She scrambled back on her elbows. The thunder from orbit continued. Their shockwaves stirred her hair. Finally, the energy bubble encasing the alien redoubt collapsed, and the lance beams struck home. Under the combined orbital barrage and the cannons of the advancing tanks, the walls began to shatter.

She got up. She knew if she did not move then, she might never again. For the moment, the blessing of the Emperor's fury kept her moving, but if she stopped, the pain from her wounds would cripple her, and she would be able to fight no more.

There were others dazed like her, on the ground, or staggering blindly on.

'Forward!' she shouted. 'Forward with the tanks! In the name of the Emperor!'

Without waiting to see if others would follow, she ran after the tanks. There were columns of Astra Militarum advancing in the shelter of the armour. One of the tanks was hit and exploded. The turret lifted off, fire bursting from the hull. The turret hung precariously from a twist of metal, poised to fall. More energy beams came crackling in. The infantry fanned out, threw themselves down, and returned fire.

The aliens were coming. They seemed human at first, through the blood mist and the smoke. They were not human. Glowing green eyes she saw, and the infernal lights of their weapons. They fired more of that strangely braided energy. It carved furrows in the sides of the tanks. A commander, perhaps the one that had shouted at her and saved her life, was stripped to a bloody ruin that flopped from the turret like a wet flag.

She pulled the trigger on her chainsword, and charged.

They were much bigger than they first appeared. They weren't even alive, but some kind of automaton. Immense metal skeletons, the image of death itself. They trudged implacably forward, their guns spewing green light, hideously, ominously silent. The scriptures said the xenos were worthy of only hatred. She had accepted that as the truth her entire life, but now, facing them for the first time, she truly understood. These were wicked things.

She picked one out and screamed her prayers. Her target turned its immobile face towards her. The thing must have weighed as much as five men. Slender legs sank halfway up its shins into the mud, though that seemed to pose no difficulty to it.

Upon the end of its long rifle was a heavy blade. It hefted the weapon like a long-handled axe, and swung it at her.

A plasma stream cut into the xenos before it could strike. It fell down, legs separated from its torso. It bled green light instead of blood. Incredibly, it tried to get up. Some strange alchemy was occurring where its spine had been severed. The metal ran. She expected that, plasma melted everything, but this metal was running the wrong way. It was coming back together.

The machine rolled over, and lunged at her, metal fingers grasping for her leg. She shot it three times with the laspistol. The sacred light only scorched the metal, and it carried on towards her, dragging itself forward. She dropped her pistol, reversed her sword, and with a two-handed grip forced the whirring teeth against the exposed vertebrae of its neck. Sparks fountained where the weapon bit into unclean alien metal. The thing grabbed her ankle, and squeezed. Her flesh was nothing to it. She was sure it would break her leg, but then the head came free and the grip slackened, and she kicked free of the hand.

The witch-fire of its eyes dimmed, and went out.

She expected that to be that, but the xenos had one more vile trick. Its whole corpse shimmered, then amazingly faded from view. She gaped at the indentation it left in the earth. It had been there. There were the scores in the ground made by its raking fingers. There the trench dug by its broken spine. But it had gone.

She wrinkled her nose at the blasphemy of it, and spat where it had been.

Lucky for her the battle afforded this moment of hate. The aliens were falling, brought down by disciplined volleys of las-fire, or picked apart by specialist weapons troopers wielding plasma and fusion guns. A squad of infantry jogged past towards the receding tanks.

Shanni Saintsgift followed.

Fleets moved with coordinated clumsiness across Khestrin’s hololith. Betaris roughly followed Alpharis, tracking the same approach to Mesmoch, though on a different vector. Gammaris was deliberately holding back, rearranging its line of battle, as if it couldn’t decide on its course of action. This too was a deliberate ruse. He repeatedly demanded augury sweeps from ships across the fleet, orders which were briskly carried out and the results delivered to him without fuss, the way he liked it.

Everything was moving smoothly, but these were nervous hours for Khestrin. It was quiet in the ship. Muttered conversation, the hum of machines, the distant yet ever-present roaring of the ship's main engine stack as they underwent constant acceleration towards Mesmoch. He listened for the orders coming from below, he timed the firing of the jets or the adjustment of systems by his heartbeat, counted the dull throb of each pulse from the moment he would have given an order to when Brahe actually did it.

'Bearing up?'

Khestrin looked up into the face of Rear Admiral Dho Gan Mey, representative of the Navis Imperialis on the Council Exterra.

Khestrin smiled apologetically. 'You caught me.'

'Second-guessing Shipmaster Brahe at every turn, eh?'

'How did you guess?'

'Because I'm doing exactly the same thing.'

'Hard to shake the habit.'

'At least you have something to do. My role here is strictly advisory.'

Mey had a cup of coffee. Real coffee. Not recaff; men such as them never had to drink swill like that. He handed it to Khestrin.

'An admiral serving me beverages,' said Khestrin.

Mey shrugged. 'I didn't make it myself, but I thought it might be welcome.'

'And you wanted a look at the fleet.'

'I did say you had something to do, and that I do not.'

'Second-guessing me too, are we?'

Mey reset his shoulders. He was an old man with the pale skin of someone raised in dark environs. Khestrin wasn't familiar with Mey's history beyond his achievements in the service, so he did not know whether his appearance was the result of adaptation to high-latitude winters, void living, or life underground. He suspected the former. Mey's skin had a thickness that suggested some time outside, and the folds over his eyes were common in human populations accustomed to bright environments. Steppes, he thought, or tundra. The human form was amazingly adaptable. Each man, woman and child carried a host of evolutionary tricks that had come into being on Old Earth, now redeployed for life in the stars. He knew in which regions of Terra the original human types had evolved, how they re-

emerged and changed and drifted quite rapidly into novel forms when man settled a new planet. Khestrin knew this because he was an exceptionally well-educated man, although he was largely ignorant of how well educated he was. He had that peculiar blindness common to the rich, having been born into such high society and having associated with people similar only to himself. The lives of the lower orders could never be anything more than a flat intellectual abstract to him.

‘What do you expect?’ Mey said. ‘I’m bored. I get all the tension of going into combat without being in a position to do anything about it. Can you imagine?’

‘No,’ said Khestrin. He sipped the coffee. It was good, dark and strong, very bitter. He wondered which world it had come from. ‘I can’t.’

‘You will,’ said Mey with grim amusement. ‘One day you’ll find yourself in a position like mine, where it’s all influence and no lasgun. Emperor, how I wish for a command again.’ He looked over the deck below. ‘I’d even go for a section command, never mind a voidship like this.’

‘Really?’ said Khestrin. ‘I think you’re jesting.’

‘Maybe. I don’t know,’ said Mey. ‘I admit I am exaggerating. I suppose if that were to happen I’d be thoroughly outraged. That’s the problem with power. It is too easy to become accustomed to it.’ He looked over the instruments. ‘We are closing on Mesmoch. Three, maybe four hours, do you think?’ he asked.

‘Give or take,’ said Khestrin. ‘We’ll be in range for torpedo bombardment soon, but the primarch wishes to wait so we can put targeted mass shot down in conjunction with any torpedo strike.’

‘They have some fancy shielding, these aliens.’

‘It’s not invulnerable,’ Khestrin said. ‘Reports from Kallides’ battles were brief, but these shields have been reported in other engagements with these xenos. The one around this pylon is particularly powerful, that’s all. It is not invulnerable.’

‘It’s still there, though, is it not? Didn’t Kallides put a Titan down?’

‘Yes, but only one, and we have a fleet. So did they, I’ll grant you, but their fleet was busy evacuating everyone it could from the ground. They just did not bring enough firepower to bear. We won’t make the same mistake.’

Mey grinned. ‘It always comes down to the big guns, eh?’ He clapped Khestrin on the shoulder. ‘You keep it up, Khestrin. I’ll be at the back there somewhere, moping that I don’t have my hand on the firing lever.’

‘I can let you give a few orders if it would make you feel happier, rear admiral.’

Mey held up his hands and smiled. ‘Now you’re humouring me. I’ll just watch. That way if it all goes wrong, I can blame you.’ He winked. He was joking, but he meant it. That was the way it was in the Navy, the way of all power.

Khestrin saluted Mey with his mug. ‘Thanks for the coffee.’

‘You are most welcome,’ said Mey.

Khestrin turned back to his instruments, the depictions of fleets and worlds and the millions of lives on them. There was still no sign of the enemy.

‘Where are you?’ he muttered to himself. ‘Where by Horus’ devils are you?’

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Chapter Thirty-Two

ARGENT SHROUD

FAITH'S BALM

BEWARE THE KING

A wall of black smoke reached the sky where the alien fortress burned. They were still hunting down the last of the alien machines, corralling them where more powerful weapons could be brought to bear upon them and their self-repair mechanisms overwhelmed. Lasguns didn't touch them. Bolters made little impact. Killing them was the work of heavier weaponry.

The base established by Marron's battle group was not in much better state. A large section of a city had been adapted for military purposes. Behind a line of fortified hab-blocks a sense of hollowness prevailed when elsewhere the city felt dense. Living up to his nickname of the Bull Grox, Marron had razed a whole district to clear fire lanes. Otherwise, the place was weirdly untouched. The base had taken the brunt of the xenos attack. It was two-thirds finished, and scored by the cruel effects of gauss weaponry, but the holes and craters in the city buildings seemed to be the result of misses, not deliberate attacks, and more damage had been done by Battle Group Kallides than the necrons.

Captain Trilthoilis of the Rillian 398th Pioneers guided Emmanuelle and her command group through the trenches.

‘You say this world was abandoned when you arrived?’

‘All of them were, so I heard,’ said Trilthoilis, who appeared haggard and worn down. His uniform reflected his physical appearance. His buttons were dull, the colour of the cloth had lost its vibrancy. ‘Every one. Like the whole population had got up and left at once.’

‘That’s impossible,’ said Palatine Marian.

Trilthoilis shrugged tiredly. ‘That is what had happened. So I heard,’ he stressed.

‘There was no damage? No sign of attack?’

‘None,’ he said. ‘I mean, there was damage, but that was accidental, reactors gone hot without supervision, crashes, fires, that kind of thing.’

‘The enemy came only when Kallides arrived, then?’

‘Yes. We fought hard for this system, we cleared out the abominations.’ He coughed. He wasn’t well.

‘A fitting name,’ said Marian.

Trilthoilis nodded. ‘That’s what our tech-priests called them. Abominations. It stuck. When Lord Marron moved on, we were left here. Then this began to happen.’ He gestured around himself wearily.

There were sick men everywhere, far sicker than Trilthoilis. They leaned listlessly against the sandbags. Their eyes were dull. A few had more life about them, but they moved slowly, and their faces were drawn. They didn’t say much, even when the Sisters blessed them. The sight of the icons borne by the Imagifiers and the prayers of the priests that followed her warriors seemed to stir them but little, whereas Emmanuelle was used to displays of devotion when they went among the common men. Trenches never were the healthiest spaces, but this was no fever. It was something she had not seen before. The stilling.

‘You have many sick,’ said Emmanuelle.

‘We are all sick,’ said the captain. ‘We were not so affected by it here to begin with, which is why Groupmaster Marron decreed that this system be used as an anchor for the advance. I heard it gets worse the further in you go.’

‘You have not heard from your fleet command for some time.’

‘No. Except, except… Well, except what I’m going to show you. The effect has become worse here over these last months, until many of us are unable to fight. Some of us are dying, strangely, and slowly. I have not

heard from Paradyce IV for some time. I expect it is the same there. I can't say for certain. We haven't even heard from them.'

He not only seemed exhausted, but dispirited, as if all hope had been surgically excised from his being.

'A malady of the soul,' said Marian. 'The Emperor will lift them up.'

'I pray so,' he said doubtfully.

'Listen to yourself, captain,' Emmanuelle said quietly, though with iron in her voice. The sight of the men displeased her. They had been tested, and found wanting. 'Can you not hear your own lack of faith? The reports from your battle group say He lifts up those who believe truly in Him and His supremacy. He is the light of the galaxy. He shall lead His chosen people into perpetual dominance of the stars. So it has been written since the days He walked among us. The arch-traitor sought to cut Him down and what did he achieve? Ten thousand years of the Imperium. The Emperor watches over us still, and will guide us through this crisis. These xenos and their foul magics cannot extinguish the light of Terra.'

Trilthoilis looked at her, and something seemed to change a little. His eyes became a touch brighter. He stood straighter. He removed his hat, clasped it in his hands, and bowed his head.

'Forgive me, Sister. We have been through much. Come, let me show you. This way is the section medicae station. You will see the full cost of holding this world for yourself in here.'

'The man you told me of is there?'

'In quarantine. I would not waste your time with nonsense, I swear by the Throne,' he said miserably.

He showed her to a run of steps that went under the ground. They were of plascrete, and clean. At the bottom a heavy plasteel door closed the way. A pump ran quietly at the side, keeping water out. She ordered her squad to a halt.

'Pray with these men,' she told them. 'Go among them. Bless them. Remind them of their duty to the saviour of mankind. Recall their spirits to their bodies, the strength to their limbs. Lead them in song. Fortify their souls, my Sisters. These are the soldiers of the Emperor. See that they remember it.'

Her warriors moved away as bidden.

The captain waited for her by the door.

‘Call the Hospitallers,’ she said to Marian. ‘Get locations of all their medicae stations from their Munitorum officers. I want priests and Sisters in every one. Have them pray, Sister. All of them.’

Marian nodded her assent. ‘It shall be done, canoness.’

The door opened. Emmanuelle followed the captain inside.

They went into a long, dark room, the low ceiling punctuated infrequently by dim lumens. Like the men, they seemed sapped of energy. Rows of beds ran down each wall, a third row down the middle. There was an open door at the back leading into another ward, and Emmanuelle saw another door at the far end of that.

Exhausted staff of the medicae officios tended the sick. There were very few battlefield injuries. Emmanuelle supposed necron weapons were so powerful that not many who were hit by them survived. Besides the maladies of immobility, bed sores, bodily filth, and atrophy, most of the patients seemed unharmed. But empty eyes stared at the low ceiling uncomprehendingly. The best of them were listless, the worst catatonic.

‘Sister!’ A man in a doctor’s uniform hurried forward.

‘Doctor Gilus,’ Captain Trilthoilis said, a tired and perfunctory introduction. ‘This is Canoness Emmanuelle of the Argent Shroud.’

‘If we had known they were coming…’

‘You would what?’ said Emmanuelle. ‘Bid them walk?’

Her manner flustered the doctor. ‘I… No, I meant… I meant no disrespect. I–’

‘They suffer the stilling?’

‘Yes,’ said the doctor. ‘All of them.’

‘Then they shall no more,’ she said. She turned from the doctor. She lifted the icon she wore around her neck, a stylised ‘I’ surrounded by a starburst centred on a skull.

‘This is the symbol of the Holy God-Emperor of Terra!’ she said. Her voice was honed by a decade of prayer and command, and reached every corner of the medicae ward. ‘By this shall you know Him. Imperator!’

She turned slowly, showing it to the room, then began to walk slowly along the beds.

‘Imperator! He is not in this symbol. He is in you, and you.’ She pointed at men lying motionless on the cots. ‘Imperator! He is in me. I fear not the power of the xenos, for faith in Him shines in my heart, and reaches out to

Him, and in return He suffuses me with His holy will that no xenos or heretic can douse. Imperator! Look inside yourselves, and you shall find it, for we are all the children of Terra!'

The soldiers in the beds stirred as she passed them.

'Have faith, brothers, sisters. Have faith in Him, the Throne, the God-Emperor! Imperator! Imperator! Imperator!'

Heavy heads rose. Eyes clouded for weeks cleared. A catatonic man blinked. He raised an arm, and moaned. All through the bunker there was movement, an awakening. Men returned from dark sleep.

'Impossible,' said the medicae doctor. 'That's impossible.'

'Nothing is impossible if you have faith in the Emperor of Mankind,' said Emmanuelle. 'Nothing. This is a lesson for you.'

The medicae nodded dumbly, ashamed, and fell to his knees, hands clasped in prayer. Emmanuelle rested one hand on his head and raised the other high, palm upward.

'Faith will bear you up. Faith will wake you. Faith will bring you victory!'

The door to the outside opened and Sisters Hospitaller moved into the field hospital, examining men, helping them up where they were not too wasted away.

'Any that can walk will take up a weapon,' Emmanuelle commanded. 'The Emperor has work for you. You have slept in silent darkness long enough.'

She turned to the captain again. His eyes were shining with wonder. Even in the dim light of the bunker, she could see colour returning to his face.

'Now do you believe?'

He too fell to his knees. 'I do, I do, forgive me! Forgive us.'

'There is nothing to forgive. You came close to losing your faith, but you stood strong. You passed your test. Now stand before me as a proud soldier of Terra, and show me what I must see.'

'When the fleet moved on, leaving us here to secure the Paradyce System, we struggled to communicate. You have seen the effect on the men – it is far worse for our regimental witches. Several of them died. The astropaths sleep all the time, and when they are awake, they say they cannot see the beacon.' He gave them a quizzical look.

'They speak of the Astronomican,' Emmanuelle told him. 'The light of the Emperor. It guides the Navigators through the warp, though other mutants

have the gift of seeing it, if they look. They are blessed, despite their deviancy.'

Trilthoilis led her down a long corridor. There were storerooms and operating theatres off to the sides. At the end was a heavy door.

'He's in there,' he said.

They reached it. They stopped.

'Lord Marron kept in touch by messenger relay,' he said, 'sending fast ships back along the route of the main advance. It took months for the ships to get here, but at first they came regularly. We heard that Ephrael Stern had joined them.'

'The Heretic Saint,' murmured Emmanuelle in distaste.

'There were victories. The last message we received said they were driving for a major xenos world, many light years from here.'

'This is privileged information, for a man of your rank,' said Emmanuelle.

He shrugged. 'Everyone above me is dead, so I sit on the council resettling the world' – he caught himself – '*attempting* to resettle the world, as highest-ranking Astra Militarum commander.' He pulled himself up a little, remembering his role and his responsibilities. 'I receive the reports.'

'And this man you have in here?'

'From the last ship. I don't trust what he says. His vessel came in damaged. You know the signs of their weaponry, they're clear to see, as if the metal has been gnawed. It was them alright.' He looked behind him nervously, and his voice dropped a touch. 'They'd done something to them. Look.'

He reached into his satchel and pulled out a battered data-slate. He keyed the activation rune. The slate was an unsophisticated model, standard Militarum issue; the screen was small and low resolution. Vid-capt footage, almost certainly from a squad-leader's helm vid-capter, filled the glass.

'Watch,' said Trilthoilis.

Another touch set the image in motion. Raspy, heavy breathing accompanied the picture, blurred with vox-thief distortion. The man was in a void-sealed suit. Navy, thought Emmanuelle.

'Life signs are this way, we're proceeding.'

Footsteps, muffled by distance, joined the breathing. The man kept up a steady commentary, but the rasping of heavy, sealed fabric on fabric

drowned out half of his words. A shotgun barrel preceded him. Lumens flickered.

'…obably more still…d,' the man was saying. *'Ahead, through that door, Chevenis, Rosik, take point.'*

Two more Naval armsmen jogged by in armoured voidsuits. The stablights mounted above their faceplates shone huge circles on the door. These shrank and brightened as they approached. She admired the way the voidsmen moved. Their gear was heavy, awkward, and unpowered, yet they were hardly inconvenienced.

They took up position either side of the door. One covered the rune pad with a boxy tumbler cracker. The other aimed his gun at the door. The one by the rune pad turned back, his suit light dazzling the primitive optics of the vid-capter. It made the man seem alien, almost animal, like a deep-ocean thing.

'Go,' said the sergeant.

The voidsman activated the cracker. There was a brief flash of light round the edges. No sound – they were in vacuum, then.

The door flew up into the ceiling. Air blasted out. A single-shuttle hangar waited beyond, a squat Arvus lighter filling most of it, toothed void gates only just slightly bigger than the craft behind it. The mother vessel was a small one, she guessed.

Five men stood in a line on the other side. They gurned almost comically, hands twitching. They were armed, and with a chill Emmanuelle realised they were fighting with themselves not to open fire.

'Drop your weapons! Drop your weapons!' the voidsmen screamed. An alarm blared. Lights flashed. The sounds were distorted, carried uncertainly on the weak decompression wind.

'Low atmospheric pressure, low atmospheric pressure,' a machine voice moaned. Somewhere behind the sergeant, heavy doors slammed down. A pipe hissed.

'G-g-g-get away!' one of the men in the hangar shouted with painful difficulty. His jaw was locked, and didn't want to cooperate with him. His hands trembled. The lascarbine he carried wanted to rise up and poke death at the voidsmen from its snub-nose. *'G-g-get away!'*

'Drop your weapons!'

The convulsions of the men in the hangar worsened. Emmanuelle was sure she saw a flash of green in the eyes of one of them, like a nocturnal beast.

A brighter flash of las-fire interrupted the image. The sergeant's view jerked wildly. There was shooting from all quarters.

The vid-capt ceased.

'Xenos control,' said Emmanuelle.

'That's what our medicae say,' said Trilthoilis. 'He's lucid sometimes. Whatever influence they have is constant.'

'He is the only survivor?' Emmanuelle asked.

Trilthoilis nodded.

'You say he has a message?'

'For the Imperial Regent, can you believe?' He smiled sadly. 'This is probably sinful to say, but I feel sorry for him.'

'Pity is a weakness we can ill afford,' said Emanuelle. 'Banish it from your heart. Now open the door.'

She never learned the man's name. It was not important. He was not important. No individual human being could ever be called so.

Like the rest of the complex, the room was a rockcrete prefab stamped from an STC mould and buried underground. The messenger sat on the far side of the room in a filthy straitjacket, legs sprawled in front of him. He was manacled by the neck to a chain connected to a half-loop buried deeply in the wall. She could smell him from the far side of the room, a mix of sweat, human waste, and despair. When she entered, he had his head buried in his arms. He looked up when he heard the whine of powered armour, and once more Emmanuelle caught a glimpse of silvery green at the back of his eyes.

'You have come for me,' he said.

'You have a message.'

The man nodded. 'From them. I can feel it, scratching around at the back of my head. It wants to get out.' He looked at her with an expression of pure misery.

'Then speak it, and be delivered from your suffering.'

The man shook his head so hard the chain rattled.

'I can't, I can't. It's for him, you see? Only for him!'

Emmanuelle took a step further into the room. ‘I am a blessed bride of the Emperor. What you tell me, He will know.’

The man laughed. ‘The message doesn’t believe that,’ he said.

Emmanuelle walked over to him. His stench filled her throat. She did not balk, but knelt by him.

‘Do you know what the worth of an individual is?’ she said. ‘Do you know what his purpose is?’

‘To live. To serve. To raise a new generation for the eternal war so that mankind will survive and rule the stars. That is my purpose.’

‘No,’ she said. ‘That is not your purpose. You have no worth. An individual’s life is of no consequence to the Emperor. Not mine, not his,’ she said, nodding back at Trilthoilis. ‘Not even those of the Adeptus Astartes or those of the High Lords. Deeds. Deeds are what matters. Deeds to ensure the collective survival of our species, and our rightful domination of the stars. Deeds that see the xenos, the traitor and the heretic cast down into oblivion, so that children of Terra will rule all of space and time as He has promised we shall. *Deeds*. You shall not be remembered. You shall not be mourned. You have already been forgotten. Only your deeds matter. They are the bricks in the walls of His fortresses. Tell me this message, and His mercy shall be yours.’

She moved her hand to the bolt pistol holstered on her armoured thigh.

‘I can’t,’ he whimpered. ‘I would if I could, but it won’t let me. They boarded us. They killed everyone, then they did something to me. They put it in me. Metal skeletons. Things of death. Xenos!’ He was sweating hard. Corded tendons stood out upon his neck. He had to speak through gritted teeth.

‘Think,’ she said, her voice dropping to a soothing whisper. ‘I saw you aboard your ship. I saw you resist. Try, try for Him.’

The man rocked back and forth on his heels. His teeth ground. The noises he made were those of a man going mad.

‘Try!’ Emmanuelle urged. ‘Try!’

The man let out a great howl of anguish, then gabbled, ‘He is coming! He is coming!’

‘Who?’

Another cry, and he spoke his final words.

‘The Silent King! The Silent King! The Silent King! Go from this place, go, or be destroyed!’

And with that, he spun round and drove his head forward onto the staple in the wall with such force that his skull cracked with a bang, and he slumped dead on the ground.

His feet twitched. The smell of blood was rich and strong.

Emmanuelle got to her feet. ‘We are no better informed.’

In the matter leaking from the dead man’s skull, tiny motes of green light sparkled.

‘Burn this,’ said Emmanuelle.

Trilthoilis gaped.

‘Burn it now!’

The captain recovered himself and summoned support.

A steady machine wail set up, rising and falling, a noise a human from any age would recognise. A warning siren. Vox-chatter crackled up from Emmanuelle’s collar.

‘A fleet,’ she said. ‘Dozens of ships.’

They went from the room, passing a soldier carrying a flamer. Before they reached the end of the corridor, the messenger’s corpse was burning in the cell.

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Chapter Thirty-Three

PYRAMIDS

BLASPHEMOUS INTERVENTIONS

A PRICE TO PAY

Messinius had no idea how Cawl's equipment worked. The drop pods' seats had been removed, and replaced with ugly-looking fusions of Imperial and necron technology. When activated by his Techmarine, the machines shone barely perceptible cones of light which petered out a hundred feet into the air.

Messinius sent the signal pulse: low power, short, like everything else, designed to not reveal their presence. Twenty minutes later, four Thunderhawks touched down in tight formation. Cawl emerged from the first with his scarred giant, a group of skitarii rangers, and a trio of heavy, tracked combat servitors bearing plasma cannon, all of them equipped with the grenade-sized orbs of alien technology. From the second gunship came a second group of Martians led by an enormous death-cult cyborg, a four-legged magos and his shifty-looking acolyte. The other ships carried fifty more of Messinius' men wearing heavier configurations of Mark X armour, mainly of the Tacticus and Gravis types.

'Splendid, splendid, splendid!' Cawl exclaimed, rubbing his hands together. His axe was suspended at his side in the metal grips of his

mechadendrites. His guns nosed at the air, sniffing for targets. ‘An excellent job.’

‘We are ready to depart for the mission target,’ said Messinius. ‘This place is dangerous. We should be about our business and away.’

‘Oh, I agree,’ said Cawl. ‘If one of these machines here wakes up to our presence then we shall all be dead.’

He seemed almost excited by the idea.

Messinius detailed his more heavily equipped men to set up a perimeter around the gunships. As they were leaving, Techmarines were unloading crates that contained remote weapons platforms. The defences would look impressive when complete, but they would serve only to buy a little time.

Once he was satisfied his orders were being carried out, Messinius joined the tech-priest, Hiax, with thirty of his men. Cawl and Primus set off on their own course.

Messinius’ group descended the slope and headed for their target pyramid. The ground was shattered and covered in tiny flakes of noctilith. Crevasses radiated in angular jags out from the walls. The building had thrust itself up from the ground, grown rather than built, an intrusive parasite. An imperial edifice imposed upon the world. It had been made by a race that intended to dominate.

‘You are on edge, my lord,’ said the tech-priest, Hiax. His full name was one of those interminable lists of numbers and words the Martians favoured, more designation than appellation, as Cawl had jovially said.

‘There is an element of madness to this,’ said Messinius.

‘There is, I suppose,’ said Hiax, ‘but I have accomplished many missions on necron worlds. This one will be no different.’

Hiax’s acolyte Osel-den walked beside his master, and from the look on his face behind the clear plastek of his rebreather mask he did not share his master’s confidence.

‘This is a high-threat world from a purely classificatory standpoint,’ Hiax went on. ‘If one’s main criterion of threat is enemy numbers, then this would appear to be extremely foolhardy. The truth of it is more complicated. Each of these things you see flying around and scuttling about could kill me. The smallest outpost world of the necrons has thousands of these things. There are millions here. Is that objectively more dangerous?

No. The number does not matter. The real danger is if they notice you or not. You'll be dead anyway if they do, however many there are.'

'There are more eyes to notice. More ears to hear.'

'Also true, also a very human way of looking at it. These things are essentially mindless. In some ways, they are less sophisticated than our own servitors.' He waved a mechadendrite at a stream of scarabs flying in a line from a hole in one hill-sized pyramid to another. 'Alone, they operate to strictly defined parameters, in their case, general maintenance.'

'Until they notice you,' said Messinius.

'Exactly. Other automata tend to the scarabs, or maintain the more complex machines, or deal with intruders. Each has their own role. When the higher forms are on the field, we see increasing complexity in the carrier waves that control them, and their behaviour consequently becomes more flexible. Either the higher necrons directly operate these machines or their presence simply triggers more complex behaviours. Maybe both. I like to think of them as social insects. Or perhaps the tyranids, if you want a biological example you might be more familiar with. The way they act with greater direction when their leader beasts are present is not entirely dissimilar to the way these machines operate, so I believe, but I am no expert on tyranids.'

'You are an expert on necrons.'

'Unfortunately I am,' said Hiax. 'It is not an accolade I either sought or wanted.'

Impressive roadways linked the buildings. Sweeping stairs, gleaming as if they were freshly laid, climbed up to monumental gates. A few legged alien machines used the stairs, plodding like lonely mountaineers. Messinius' group stayed away from them, traversing the unstable scree to the place where the heavy-lintelled entrance to the pyramid yawned wide. Lines of scarabs floated inside under the apex of the geometric arch, nose to tail.

When the gate was ten yards away, Messinius turned to look over their route. Their footprints left a messy trail all the way up the slope. They had gained several hundred feet in height; still the bronze cap of the pyramid was far above.

The Thunderhawks were small and boxy at the edge of the ridge. Firestrike turrets at the corners of the landing zone panned back and forth across the landscape. The wing mounts of the Thunderhawks were ready in between.

Space Marines made up the rest of the ring of ceramite watching the surrounding terrain.

Off to the north, Cawl's pyramid climbed higher than Messinius' target. The archmagos ascended to its gaping mouth directly up its stairs. His cyborg soldiers followed him, and the two squads of Space Marines Messinius had assigned for his protection. Cawl liked to lead from the front, Messinius thought. He would have admired his courage, but it was arrogance rather than bravery that drove him on. That abomination of a gene experiment walked alongside his master, and if there ever was a bigger sign of hubris than that monster, Messinius had yet to witness it. Having had his concerns about the Primaris Marines mostly allayed, he found them flaring up again now he saw their prototype.

'My lord, shall we proceed?'

Thothven's question brought Messinius back to himself. The stilling was doing its work. His senses were dull. He was struggling to concentrate.

He turned to look at the low parapet at the edge of the steps. His head was heavy. The scene seemed unreal. 'I shall go first. Let me test this device of Cawl's.'

'It will work,' said Hiax. 'The archmagos is a genius.'

Messinius walked the last few crumbly steps to where the high kerb of greenish-black stone divided conquered world from its conquerors. He crossed it brazenly.

Thothven ordered the men to cover him. Boltguns were racked, ready to fire.

More so than before, there was an enervating feeling to Messinius' environs, and he had to force himself on. His armour detected a deterioration in his mental processes, and dosed him with stimulants, but they did little to dispel the greyness impinging upon him. His hearts quickened, his body warmed, but the alertness and crystal clarity the drugs ordinarily brought were absent.

He stood in the middle of the steps and waited to see if he would be detected. A tripedal thing eighteen feet high approached him, three huge globes lighting its front. Messinius could only think of them as eyes. A number of fussy-looking limbs dangled from its compact torso.

It moved with an odd, staggering gait, like a slow-motion gallop. It balanced on its rearmost leg, and lifted up the front pair, planting them

carefully, before lifting up the last, bringing it through the forelimbs, setting it down and repeating the process. It was not in any kind of hurry.

Messinius held his ground, his giant power fist hanging inactive at his side, his plasma pistol holstered and off. The machine reached the step below, saw Messinius, and halted.

It bent down slowly, trinary optical sensors flicking from armour plate to armour plate.

Messinius stood calmly. He kept his armour systems running at the same level. There was no point reducing its capabilities to near uselessness. They needed their armour to succeed.

As the machine examined him, it stepped around on legs that looked coltishly feeble. The long levers of metal should snap under the first blow of his fist. Only they would not, Messinius was sure, from what he had heard of the necrons.

The thing made curious chittering noises. Longer arms unfolded from under its high cowling, busy at nothing, their joints clicking. Luminous devices flicked out on long, flexible limbs, their light a strange frequency that left lurid smears where they passed.

The Space Marines tracked its motions with their weapons, targeted firmly on its weakest points. Messinius wondered how many bolt-rounds would be required to bring the thing down.

The machine sank lower, bringing the sensing equipment gathered tight under its carapace level with Messinius' face.

The eyes flickered. An alien machine spirit regarded the Space Marine curiously from inside. A flat beam played out of a lens, passed up and down his torso, over the grenade-sized object Cawl had defiled his armour with. The beam stopped on this, focused into a tighter cone upon it, and moved back up it, and down.

The machine stood abruptly, stepped around him on its pointed feet, and lurched off with surprising speed into the pyramid.

Messinius allowed himself to breathe out. Cawl's blasphemous intervention had worked.

'Are we clear?' Thothven voxed.

None of the other constructs noticed them, but beetled on with their never-ending tasks. A scarab scuttled along the ground from inside the pyramid.

Messinius put his foot in front of it. It stopped, and walked round it, then took off, buzzing loudly, and joined the lines floating through the air.

‘Clear,’ said Messinius.

He went under the arch into the dark. The hum of the scarabs was amplified by the closeness of the corridor. Fifty yards in, the scarabs vanished into a circular aperture. The group passed by it, and the buzzing dwindled. The corridor took a turn down under the ground, dark stone reflecting green light flowing in angular patterns carved into the walls and ceiling.

Now Messinius drew his gun. He thumbed the activation rune. The charging coils started to fill with a hard blue.

‘Which way?’ Messinius asked. His head felt like it was full of shredded felt. He could almost taste it, his tongue cottony and fat.

‘In tomb complexes, the main gates are usually in chambers around the central hibernation tabernacle,’ Hiax answered.

‘Usually?’

‘We don’t know!’ Osel-den whispered. His breathing mask was fogged, and his eyes glinted with fear. ‘We have not been on a world of this category before. We are tomb robbers, not guerrillas.’

Hiax shushed him. ‘The principles are the same. The necrons favour a templated technology, much like our ancestors did. The patterns repeat.’

‘Then come to my side. We shall lead together. Squads Secundus and Tertius, hold the entrance. Thothven, split your men. Half up front behind me. You lead the others in rearguard.’ He had given the squads deliberately simple names. Let their sergeants earn the right to name them by their deeds. ‘Keep interactions with the machines to a minimum.’

Alpha Primus suffered.

The stilling pressed on him with the weight of an ocean. He imagined that it felt a little like being unable to breathe at the bottom of a sea. Nothing but dark and cold around you. His psyker’s sight was a dull grey field. Moving was an effort. Each foot felt as heavy as a boulder. Each footstep was carefully placed, and resented. Cawl was talking. Cawl was always talking. Endlessly, relentlessly, tediously. He could not bear it.

The pyramids crowded him. Each one leaning at him as if they were sentient, geometric beings who took a personal, disturbing interest in him.

He felt seen. He did not like it. It reminded him uncomfortably of his youth on Cawl's butcher's table, that sense of avid interest.

'Go away,' he murmured, and realised he was close to delirium. He had always despised his psychic nature, but now deprived of it he felt awful, nauseous, naked. Without the chatter of other people's minds, he was deaf. He was lost. His head ached. His limbs ached. These were not the pains he experienced always, the knifing heat of old surgeries and half-perfected gene-craft, but something worse. His mouth tasted of ashes, and he drooled.

The pyramid was a long way ahead. It wavered, like a hallucination, like something that was only half-real. The absence was stronger around it and around the other five pyramids that made up the complex, and this was only the edge of the Pariah Nexus. What horror there must be for the likes of him nearer the heart. He realised that above all things he wished to go no further into the zone.

He realised he was afraid.

Suddenly, as if he had not walked up the last hundred steps to the pyramid but had been picked up by some mischievous god and deposited there, he found himself at the entrance. Cawl's skitarii were heading inside. Heavy kataphron servitors trundled after them. He looked around groggily. The other Space Marines were moving more easily than he was, but did he notice a little hitch to their steps? Were they not so marvellously coordinated as usual?

Anticipating this effect, Messinius had left his psykers behind. Why had Cawl inflicted this on him? Another of his heartless experiments. The archmagos treated him like an animal.

Then he blinked, and Cawl was in front of him, his wizened old face mimicking concern.

'Are you alright, Primus? Are you alright?'

Primus shook his head. He was very far from alright.

'I will survive, master.'

'Come on, there's a good fellow. You stay with me. Once we get into the central chamber, and I shut down the stilling effect, then you should feel better.'

Primus nodded. Shakily, he took off his helmet. Saliva ran from it when he lifted it over his head. Cawl plucked a cloth from somewhere in his voluminous robes and wiped Primus' face, a paternal gesture that made

Primus' anger flare. The air was very thin, nearly unbreathable. It smelled like promethium exhaust.

'Do you feel better?'

'No,' said Primus.

'Then we'd best be quick, eh? I am sorry. I had no idea this would affect you so much. My my, the stilling is a punishment on psykers, isn't it?'

You had some idea how bad it would be, thought Primus, *but that didn't stop you from wanting to find out, by using me to test your hypothesis.*

He said none of this. Instead, he only nodded.

The orb of Mesmoch hung placid and blue in the endless dark. Its sheath of air glowed with reflected sunlight. Its oceans gleamed.

All eyes were fixed upon a single point, a giant needle of black so tall it pierced the clouds and entered space. Khestrin had seen other giant constructions on other worlds. The fortress of the Space Wolves on Fenris, and the void-scraping hive spires of a dozen overcrowded worlds among them, but there was something about this needle of alien stone that was singular. Perhaps it was its slenderness; it seemed thin enough that he might reach out from the ship with his hand, grasp and snap it like an icicle. Perhaps it was its lonely nature, for there were no other buildings around it, no mountains. If they took the ship into the thermosphere, they would be able to view it, side-on, without obstruction.

Perhaps, thought Khestrin, it was because it was beautiful in its abhorrent, alien way, and it would not be there for very much longer.

Guilliman looked at it with an unreadable expression.

'Fleet positions?'

'Betaris waits in intercept position above the ecliptic plane, my lord,' Khestrin answered briskly. 'Gammaris is approaching the middle reaches of the system on an oblique path. They still feign disorganisation.'

'Any sign of the enemy?'

'None, my lord.'

Guilliman's eyes narrowed. Even a demigod could not know everything, but he was aware of all these facts, although he had been away from the lower strategium and in the upper chamber, managing the higher levels of the campaign. And the crusade in total, and all the campaigns that entailed, thought Khestrin. Ask him to manage a hundred such endeavours, and he

would still know what was happening everywhere in this system. But he had asked, so Khestrin had answered.

‘Munitions are ready, my lord,’ said Khestrin.

‘Your choice of weapon?’ asked Guilliman.

‘Plasma torpedoes for the demolition. As you suggested, a simultaneous hit from mass shot, explosive shells, and lances should overwhelm the shielding encasing the pylon, allowing a full torpedo strike to the base. If we are accurate enough in our timing, then one staggered volley from the fleet should topple it.’

‘Estimation of damage to the world,’ said Guilliman.

‘Total biosphere reduction, unfortunately. This is Exterminatus in all but name. According to our magi-bellus, the amount of energy released by a strike of this size will ignite the oxygen in the atmosphere, and boil the seas. Transformation to an uninhabitable world with a runaway heat feedback loop will occur once the atmospheric debris has settled. We will lose this world forever.’

‘While it will remain viable for the necrons,’ Guilliman said quietly. ‘Such sacrifices we make. Another living world burned. Very well. Target three nova cannon shells also at the base of the structure. If we’re going to kill a world, let us at least be sure our target is destroyed. Exterminatus in name as well as in actuality. This I command. Manoeuvre for best firing solution. Summon me before you give the order. I would like to see this pylon fall.’

‘Yes, my lord.’

Guilliman departed. Khestrin bowed, and returned to his work.

‘You heard the Imperial Regent,’ he told his officers. ‘Get the battle group into firing position.’

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Chapter Thirty-Four

PICKET DUTY

PUSHBACK

ORLD DEATH

Eloise Athagey was bored. She sat with her feet propped on one arm of her command throne, watching scopes that showed nothing. Battle Group Iolus cruised some half a million miles below the orbital plane of the system, the ships with their prows pointed morosely upward, like fat, spoiled fish in a pond waiting for their next feed. The Paradyce star lent the ships' grey livery a bright, sunny tinge.

The void was clear and empty in all the *Saint Aster*'s sensoria. Reports chattered in from all over the system. Paradyce II's landing had begun. Paradyce IV had some enemy presence, but it was in the process of being purged and the troop landing would commence soon. The attacks on the pylon networks would then follow. The death world of Paradyce I was in Imperial hands, the small necron complex there obliterated from orbit. Already the bone-aching effect of the stilling had diminished.

Good, she thought. She was weary under the influence of the aliens' machines. Emperor alone knew how Marron had managed to penetrate so far in the face of that. She admired him for it. She'd met him once, back when she was part of Battlefleet Obscurus, and had liked him. She cursed

the fate that saw her put under VanLeskus' command rather than the Bull Grox's. There was a man who would have put her to good use.

On the other hand, she countered, *I'd have had to follow him deep into this pit, and all the migraine-creating xeno-sorcery that fills it to the brim.*

It would have been a test though, a real test.

She reached into her pocket and took out her snuff tin, and snorted a pinch of vitadandum. It was her own blend, but it wasn't very different to the stuff they handed out to forlorn-hope details and the more privileged members of the penal legions. Giving it a name was only her way of making a sordid habit sound more refined.

It pepped her up a little. Her eyes prickled, and she rubbed her nose back and forth on the back of her hand. She dropped her feet heavily to the floor, causing a couple of her command officers to turn. There were message lights blinking on her consoles. She leaned forward and activated a hololith. News from the other flotillas.

She ran a tri-d vid-capt of the destruction of two of the alien vessels over Paradyce IV. The first attempted to break out of the Imperial cordon. The acceleration of the thing took her breath away, but in attempting to escape it blundered into a net of mass shot cast before it, and effectively tore itself apart. The other put up quite the fight, one cruiser against six Imperial ships of a similar void displacement. They were from Battle Group Firaius, U'jose's lot. Straight, searing beams emanated from the ship at several angles. She couldn't quite see where the emitters were – no turrets like the Imperial ships had. The weapons were a kind of lance or other heavy particle beam, but they were so much more powerful. One of the beams connected with a light cruiser's shields. She thought it was the *Star Phantom*, looking at the profile. The shields burst, one after the other, before the beam finished rotating, and cut through the narrow neck of the ship behind the prow. She leaned closer, watching the ploughshare head float free, trailing debris. The aft section foundered, tipping up. The crew might have survived that, but the ship would take years to repair. Another two beams cut into the *Paucity of Doubt* and that died, definitively. The reactor blew, and her holo was momentarily filled with white.

The xenos cruiser shifted without moving, teleporting, or so it appeared; she suspected it was not translocating, but simply moving too fast to follow. It shields were bizarre, giving an effect like the red edge of fire on embers

of paper, though here, as always, in green. The necron ship remained whole, until it didn't, and the shields went out with a last, smouldering sparkle, then explosions blossomed along its long, dart-like hull. It took crippling damage.

Could I beat them? she wondered. She dearly wanted to try. Six cruisers to take down two ships of the same size, with two losses. She'd made an assumption, she realised. The ship was not destroyed. A green fire raced up its hull, and it faded from view. There were self-congratulatory messages accompanying the images, but they had destroyed only one. The other had withdrawn, by some weird, alien means.

'Whole-ship teleport,' she murmured to herself. 'How frustrating.'

She wished fervently for action. She half-suspected VanLeskus had left her out there guarding the system's edge, that her words in the Dead End were nonsense and there was no common feeling there at all, that she had given her a role far from her action on purpose.

Five minutes later, she was proven wrong.

The enemy arrived so abruptly she noticed before her augury crews did. Dots streaked into the near-range tactoliths. There were two distinct groupings. She knew, just knew in the pit of her gut, that as soon as the light-speed data came in from the other flotillas to redraw her longer-range cartoliths, she'd see the same all over the system.

Only then did her augury officers see what she already had.

'Enemy contacts, multiple, coming in fast!' the Master Augurum shouted.

Finnula Diomed stood. 'Combat stations. All hands, prepare to engage.'

Bells rang. Alarms whooped. Calls were shouted out by deck officers, and the priests began their hymns of protection.

Through the oculus, Athagey saw something coming – by sight, not by machine, because the machines didn't see it. Alarms were wailing all over the command deck. A flotilla arrived not twenty thousand miles from Battle Group Iolus' position, as if the enemy knew exactly where they were. They seemed to manifest from nothing, but that was an optical illusion, she realised. They were coming in at impossible speeds, and equally impossibly stopping dead when they arrived. There were so many, arriving so suddenly, her displays could not keep up, and flickered with the strain of updating.

'Give me enemy ship numbers,' Athagey demanded. Her mouth was dry.

A flustered officer at an augury station relayed the details she needed.

‘Near range, thirty battle-cruiser class, five – no, six battleship class, forty-plus escorts…’ He looked up, white-faced. ‘They keep coming. There are dozens of them.’

More information came in conveyed by hololithic carrier wave, warning of more fleets inbound. Hololithic projections operated on a material-immaterial technology blend, and were not constrained by the sluggish speed of light. They could do with more of that right now, she thought. This battle would be won or lost on good information.

The dots of alien craft proliferated. There was a fleet to match every battle group in the system. Over two-thirds of Fleet Tertius was present, seven of its eleven battle groups. That was a force to conquer sectors, but if two xenos cruisers had gone head to head with six Imperial cruisers, and nearly come out of it on top, she feared their numbers would not be anywhere near enough.

She took another pinch of vitadandum. This time, Finnula dared look her dead in the eye. Their gazes fell at the same time to her hand. It was shaking.

Be careful what you wish for, Eloise, she said to herself. *Be very careful.*

Athagey sat back down, and cleared her throat. She owed it to her crew to show a little spine. ‘It’s a good job VanLeskus left us hanging about here where we wouldn’t steal any of her glory, or there’d be nobody to cover her pompous arse.’

There was a little nervous laughter.

‘Now it’s our turn. All fleet, void shields to full. Tight formation, sickle left. We’ve seen these xenos bastards move fast, so let’s not try to match their speed, we’ll have to try to catch them in shot clouds. All gunnery levels, run out the guns. Charge lances. Withhold fire, any long-range munitions we put out at distance will be evaded. We go in, we choose our moment, and we fill the void with everything we’ve got. Is that clear, men and women of the *Saint Aster*?’

‘Aye aye, groupmistress!’ they shouted. The ship shook as the orders were passed on to the enginarium, and the tech-priests increased the reactor’s output. Officers at the vox-stations rapidly relayed her commands to the other shipmasters in her fleet.

‘Target the nearest enemy grouping. Quick, efficient attack. Let’s show these godless metal beasts what stuff the Imperium is made of.’

‘Somebody turn those bloody alarms off!’ VanLeskus roared.

Blinding white light blazed through the oculus as a ship’s reactor went critical. The battle group was still in the process of landing their ground assets, and therefore close together, within fifty or so miles, nothing at void range. The detonation washed over two cruisers in near formation, collapsing their void shields. A cumbersome troop lander was hit by the matter cast out by the blast, and tipped over. It yawed helplessly, sliding down the gravity well of Paradyce II and towards certain destruction.

VanLeskus looked out upon chaos. The xenos had come from nowhere, literally nowhere. Nothing should be able to arrive like that. None of the many xenos species that she knew of had the capability. They were taking apart Battle Group Alphus. The *Oligarch* was swarmed by three cruisers, and transected by beams from every direction, swiftly blowing out its void shields and carving it into blazing chunks. The alien ships moved as if the drag of the planet’s mass was nothing to them, while her own vessels wallowed as helpless as beached sea beasts.

‘Get us up and out of the gravity well! We can’t stand against them here. They’ll tear us apart.’

‘What about the troop ships, fleetmistress?’

VanLeskus’ face was bathed in yellow as another lander detonated.

‘Abandon them. They’re on their own. Get the fleet away from the planet or we are all lost.’

Emmanuelle emerged into the trench complex to see crescent-shaped attack craft dropping like torrents of black seeds into the atmosphere, levelling off, and slicing the sky by the thousand, far too many to count.

Marian joined her. ‘Emperor preserve us,’ she said.

The hum of xenos contra-grav engines operating in such numbers made Emmanuelle’s teeth vibrate. The air shimmered, there were so many competing energy fields at work. The ships howled as they flew, deafening the humans on the ground with a terrifying wailing, firing long, crackling beams at ground targets. Ground batteries fired back. Airbursts puffed like sacks of burst flour. Las-beams stitched bright lines of death. The aliens swerved about the explosions, but they could not avoid them all, and Emmanuelle felt a surge of joy as one was hit and its sickle side blew off,

sending it slamming into its wingmate. Both crashed to the ground, where they detonated with a crawling display of lightning.

But there were more, very many more, and above them the slender, predatory shapes of necron voidships prowled, sackcloth-black against the pale day.

‘Why aren’t they bombarding us?’ Marian said.

‘They mean to take us, I expect, like they took the population. That is what they do. We can expect a ground assault any moment.’

‘How? I see no landing craft.’

‘Maybe them?’ said Emmanuelle. She pointed at a flight of ships that, at first glance, appeared to be like the others, except beneath their sleek fuselage they carried what looked like beam projectors. They came to an abrupt stop in the sky. The projectors tilted down, and reality twisted in front of them.

‘They’re too small to carry anything.’

Portals opened, and necron machines marched out, stepping from thin air onto the steaming ground of Paradyce II. They were firing as they came. The humans in the trenches shot back. The space between the landing aliens and the fortifications became a blistering mess of energy beams.

Now the human line was engaged, a second landing wave was launched. From orbit, alien drop-ships came down. At first Emmanuelle thought of them as a little like Space Marine drop pods, but then she saw they were much larger, and floated serenely down to rest. They bristled with energy weapons, which scorched the ground as they descended. When they touched down, tall black doors swung open. Dimensional portals crackled into action, and more necrons came out. Heavy guns pounded at the monolithic drop-craft, but when they were hit the metal flowed, and re-formed, and they were made anew.

‘This doesn’t make any sense,’ said Marian. ‘Why did they not attack like this and overwhelm the defences before we arrived?’

‘It makes perfect sense, Sister, if they were planning a trap. Gather the preceptory. We need to make a stand. Our goal has changed from reinforcement to survival.’ She looked towards the void, where bursts of light showed orbital combat had begun. ‘It’s down to the fleet now.’

‘We are in position, my lord,’ said Khestrin.

‘Then you may begin,’ said Guilliman. He stared grimly through the oculus.

Upon Khestrin’s display, the face of Mesmoch was cut into slivers by firing solutions, all of them ultimately ending at the base of the Mesmochian pylon. The pylon was reproduced on another display in real time tri-d. These images were repeated many times on the command deck below the lower strategium.

Khestrin leaned forward towards his vox-set, then paused, and turned back. ‘Rear Admiral Dho Gan Mey, would you like to give the order?’

Mey stood with Guilliman and Colquan. ‘I would not deny you the pleasure.’

‘I take no pleasure in ordering the destruction of a world, admiral.’

‘Then I solemnly accept the responsibility of Exterminatus,’ said Mey. He walked slowly to Khestrin’s side. Khestrin stepped back a little to allow him access to his vox-skull. The machine hovered up until its gaping jaws brought its vox-thief within pick-up distance of Mey’s face. Staring into it, he was reminded he was looking into the eyes of death, as tradition demanded.

‘All crews on all ships of Battle Group Alpharis. Hear me, hear me. This is Rear Admiral Dho Gan Mey of the Council Exterra.’ He put one fist behind his back, and held three fingers of his other hand aloft. ‘Commence phased bombardment on three…’ He folded down the first finger. ‘Two…’ The second finger folded. ‘One.’ His hand was now a closed fist. ‘Begin. Fire cannons.’

The *Dawn of Fire* and several other ships in its company were turned broadside-on to the planet, so the view forward was of the void. They viewed the world through their displays and the leftmost side of the oculus. Relative munition speeds dictated that their cannons be fired first. The ship shook with their discharge.

Shells streaked silently through the void. They were at close range, a few hundred miles, tilted slightly towards the target. The shells would take a few minutes to hit.

‘Begin rotation, ready the torpedoes!’ Mey ordered, and although Khestrin had had an impression of him being a soft, wily politician, the hardness of a void commander came easily to him.

The ship swung around, bringing the torpedoes to bear. Mesmoch turned into the centre of the oculus, lighting them all up with its world shine.

‘Fire torpedoes, maximum burn.’

The ship shook again. A different tremor this time, a juddering as the massive missiles pushed out from the prow.

It looked like the torpedoes would never catch the cannon shells, but their plasma drives burned bright, and they accelerated smoothly, joining the mass shot in their race towards the ground.

‘Impact in thirty seconds. Blast intensity extremis. Shutter oculus,’ Mey commanded.

Great plates of armour slid across the huge window that made up much of the forward portion of the command deck. They watched the weaponry speed towards the planet on the hololiths.

‘Impact in three, two, one – fire lances.’

The images of the world flashed. The mass shot impacted the pylon. Augur feeds showed energy spikes as the shielding all up the giant tower reacted. The mass shot was inaccurate, and plenty of it plunged into the lands around the pylon, their impact sites belching mushrooms of fire. As the shielding flickered, lance turrets from two dozen warships blazed down, striking precisely. With a flash, the pylon’s shields collapsed. Khestrin relaxed unknowingly clenched hands. He had not been certain the shields would give, but they did, opening the way for the torpedoes. Glowing hot, air burning around them, they pushed their way through the atmosphere. They hit with savage force. Plasma washed out from them in roiling fronts, ravaging the land for dozens of miles around and setting everything ablaze. Matter thrown up into the air obscured the view a little, but on the ground, the ripple of the planet’s crust was clearly visible. A clear, rolling wave like a tossed carpet, it ran out from the land and when it hit the sea, water heaved to apocalyptic heights.

Still the pylon stood.

‘Fire nova cannons,’ Mey ordered.

The guns fired across the fleet.

On the tactoliths, abstracted lines showed the path of the near-light-speed shot. The simple transference of energy into matter would have been devastating, but these weapons carried timed explosives of the most powerful sort. On the true-pict, they saw their passage as ion trails through

the atmosphere. The explosions obscured everything, and printed after-images on all their eyes. Had the shutters been open, they would have been blinded. Warning runes flashed all over the tactolith.

‘World death. World death. World death,’ a grim machine voice chanted. The humans, for their part, were deathly silent. There were no inhabitants left on Mesmoch, the aliens had seen to that, but they were killing a world nonetheless. They all understood what that meant at a fundamental, human level.

‘Open the oculus,’ Guilliman commanded.

The shutters ground back upon devastation.

A firestorm was rolling lazily around the planet, consuming everything in its path. Smoke and debris spread up and across the upper layers of the atmosphere, some of it thrown so high it would escape the world’s gravity, but the majority would rain back down, that day or years hence, subjecting the planet to a long bombardment.

All watched the pylon.

‘Fall, damn you,’ Guilliman said. ‘Fall!’

His words must have been heard by the Emperor on distant Terra, for as soon as they were said, the tip of the pylon swayed, first left, then right, as if it were peering about for a safe place to lie down. Finding none, it oscillated round and round, then collapsed.

The pylon tumbled in a slow-motion rush. The middle broke under the stress, and the tip went down almost vertically, vanishing beneath the tortured clouds of Mesmoch. There was a single blink of green under the boiling atmosphere, and it was gone. The blue, white and faint reds of electrostatic discharge took its place as lightning chased it down.

There were sounds of surprise from the crew. Faint gasps, multiplied by the hundreds on the command deck and the strategium.

Khestrin felt a lifting of a weight from his being he had been barely aware of. It did not go, not completely, it lingered at the back of his skull like a fading headache, but it had become bearable. More than bearable: for the first time in several days he felt like himself. It was a disassociation of being that had crept up on him gradually. Only by its absence did he recognise it.

‘Thank you, Rear Admiral Mey.’

‘It serves us well to remember the awful things others must do when commanded by the likes of us,’ said the admiral. ‘Thank you for reminding me of my responsibilities.’

Guilliman turned from the dying planet. ‘What costs these little victories carry,’ he said. ‘Men might have dwelled there and flourished. No more.’

Sadly, he mounted the steep stairs leading back up into the Grand Strategium. A peeping alarm struck up, then hundreds of others.

He paused, and half turned.

‘It begins?’ the primarch enquired.

‘Yes, my lord, it’s the enemy,’ Khestrin said. ‘They have taken the bait. They are here.’

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Chapter Thirty-Five

CURIOUS ARTEFACTS

THE GATES

HUBRIS

Cawl’s humming was unsettlingly out of place in the triangular, dark corridors of the control pyramid. Primus thought that at any moment, the constructs scurrying around would take note of it, realise something was awry, and attack. Yet they showed next to no interest in the trespassers. Occasionally, a scarab might stop and wave fine mechanical antennae in their direction, or pulse a stream of xenos code at them, but Cawl’s devices responded, and the machines, satisfied they meant no harm, passed them by. Primus found he could walk right at them, and they would nimbly move aside. There was such a variety of the things. The scarab types predominated, but there were other, long-legged machines, and once a huge, long thing made up of many segments and legs with a tiny head thundered past them, avoiding the advancing party by racing up the wall then along the corridor roof.

The character of the tunnels changed from triangular to circular. Hundreds of small holes pierced the walls, all of differing sizes. They curved around, disappearing into the pseudo-rock of the pyramid. The tunnels divided and

divided again without sense or pattern. A tunnel might become too small for a man to walk down, or balloon into a huge, echoing chamber.

Cawl stopped and placed his flesh hand on the smooth wall between two of the tunnels. Around him, his skitarii halted in a protective ring.

‘Curious,’ he said. ‘These features are unlike those of other necron artefacts I have studied, though I have read of something similar, on far Sotha…’ He fell silent. The metal feet of necron machines clattered on the stone. The skitarii’s power units hummed. It was deadly quiet, and in combination with the deadening effect of the stilling on his soul, Primus felt stupefied. Cawl paused in thought for so long that Primus felt obliged to speak.

‘Master, is something wrong?’

Cawl shook himself out of his thoughts.

‘Intriguing,’ he said. ‘Truly intriguing. This is not what I expected at all.’

‘Then will the plan work, master?’

Cawl smiled. ‘I certainly hope so.’ He turned on his carriage to face down a new passage. ‘This way,’ he said. ‘I think.’

Messinius’ party trudged down a long set of stairs that vanished into the dark. With every step the effect of the stilling became more oppressive, until he felt as if he were pushing through setting rockcrete. He could not recall feeling so tired ever before. Thus it was with some surprise he found himself calling a halt. He was operating unconsciously, he thought. His training took over.

They had come to the bottom of the stairs. A corridor constructed with atomic-level precision went to the left and right. There were no necron constructs about, though the place was as clean and gleaming as every other place they had seen in the pyramid.

‘This way,’ said Hiax, and turned left. His acolyte shuffled after him, even more drained of life than the Space Marines. The ogreish myrmidon did not seem affected.

The corridor went some two hundred yards before it took another precisely calibrated ninety-degree turn to the left. There was a door to the right. At the far end of the corridor, there was a second, identical door.

‘We’re here,’ Camalin Hiax said. He took out a device from his robes and placed it on the door. It pulsed light, and the door opened. Greenish light

flooded the way. Hiax took a single step forward. What he saw inside made him stop dead. ‘Omnissiah!’ said Hiax. He turned back to Messinius.

‘Is there a problem?’ Messinius asked.

‘See for yourself,’ said the magos. He stepped aside.

Messinius found himself looking into a grand, cubical chamber a hundred yards long on each side. Along the bottom were two tiered rows of closed doors that ran around every side of the room. A hundred in total. ‘This is not what was described to me.’

‘I have never seen so many gates in one place,’ said the magos. ‘Ordinarily, a chamber like this would be smaller. There would be five or six portals per wall.’

‘Will all the chambers be like this?’

‘This is in the same position as similar chambers I have seen – there is the door down the way – so I expect yes.’ Hiax pointed down the corridor. ‘The corridor will run in a perfect square, there will be a chamber at each corner. Each chamber will host a hundred gates. I say this with confidence because the necrons prefer symmetry. Cawl is right. They value this world a great deal.’

Messinius looked around the room. It was as immense as a cathedral. ‘We do not have enough explosives to destroy this place.’

‘We can cripple it,’ said Hiax. ‘Destroy the power-regulating mechanisms. There, you see?’ He pointed to ribbed columns that occupied the centre of each of the four walls. They were inactive, but dull green crept around the troughs between the ribs. Grooved circuits carved into the seamless stone spread out from them. ‘Without those, the gates will not activate.’

‘The repair time will be much shorter.’

‘It will,’ said Hiax. ‘There is little else we can do.’

Messinius nodded. ‘You heard him,’ he told his men. ‘Charges on the columns!’ He sent three groups of five men off to rig the other chambers. Soon, Space Marines were moving around the gate hall, tossing melta-flasks to each other, twisting the plungers on the top to activate them, clamping them to the walls and setting them for timed detonation.

‘As soon as the charges go off, the complex will respond and initiate repairs,’ said Hiax. He indicated closed, round doors high in the walls. ‘Those will open, they will admit scarabs. It is imperative that the timing of

this is done correctly. We will not be able to stop them coming through, but we will be able to delay them.'

'The stairs,' said Messinius. 'We shall collapse them also. If the gates are repaired and the necrons come, it will keep them contained to this level.'

'For a time, not forever,' said Hiax.

'This seems too easy,' said Messinius. The chambers were as dark and as quiet as tombs. There was no opposition. No sense of any threat other than the soul-sapping pressure of the pylons.

'These expeditions never are,' said Hiax. 'Don't let yourself be lulled by the quiet. The minute they sense something amiss, we shall be fighting for our lives.'

A sharp, electric buzz cracked through the silent room.

'Ouch!' exclaimed Cawl, and snatched his mechadendrite back from the interface point.

Primus raised his head from the wall. He was so listless he was close to catatonia. Lifting his face to look at Cawl felt like hoisting a world onto his shoulders. 'Master?'

Cawl was waving the wounded limb about, trailing a fine wisp of smoke from the adapted data spike tipping the end. 'Inserting my dataphage is proving a little harder than I expected,' he said.

They were in a room that seemed unimportant. It was large, but dark, free of any construct and bereft of the green, living light of active necron technology, excepting a faint glow that came from a hemisphere adorning the single necron control unit. The floor was as shiny and black as everything else. Two square daises that rose a few inches from the floor either side of Cawl were the only feature beside the console. The walls were at odds with the hard-edged regularity of the dais and console. They bulged in strange places, pierced with holes that twisted away into unknown spaces. Messinius' White Consuls guarded the door. A group of skitarii ringed Cawl. Half of them were further back into the twisting, labyrinthine corridors along with the kataphron heavy-combat servitors, covering the approach. Nothing would be able to come at them by conventional means. There was only the one way in. That also meant there was only one way out.

There was an eerie feeling to the chamber beyond the dead flatness of the empyrical dampening.

‘I could have sworn I had this cracked,’ said Cawl. ‘What am I doing wrong?’ He tapped his mandible with a metal finger. ‘Maybe I shall try this instead.’

Primus fought hard to stop the little sheets of lead his eyelids had become from rasping over his eyes, and failed.

Vox signals came, quiet and overlaid with the pulsing hum of Cawl’s masking device.

‘Melta charges in position, my lord.’

Messinius checked the detonation signal strength. The melta bombs waited for his command. The return signals from those further away were weaker, but the link should be enough to carry the activation command.

‘All units, fall back to the stairs.’

Space Marines trooped out at an aggressive jog. Messinius reached the door.

‘Magos,’ he called.

Hiax lingered a moment by the dormant control systems for the gates. ‘There is a lot of knowledge here,’ he said.

‘Let avarice be. We have a war to win,’ Messinius said. Hiax reluctantly came away from the console. On his four insectile metal legs, he didn’t look very different to the necrons, Messinius thought.

They entered the corridor. Messinius too broke into a jog when he realised Hiax could keep pace. Only the acolyte, Osel-den, and the myrmidon bodyguard lagged.

‘Squads six and seven, to the stair top,’ he commanded. ‘Hold at all costs, it is our only line of retreat.’

His men obeyed and left at a run, the sophisticated stealth systems of their Phobos-configuration armour masking their noise. They vanished into the dark.

‘Send your companions after them,’ said Messinius. ‘They are falling behind. We need to be out of here fast, when we go. You and I shall remain to detonate when Cawl is done.’

Hiax nodded. Osel-den and Chul-phi came up the stairs. They passed more melta-flasks stuck to the walls, their armed lights blinking. Hiax sent them

on their way. Messinius caught a glimpse of Osel-den's face in the glow of his mask lights. It was ghost-white, beaded with sweat from the effort of holding the stilling at bay.

When Messinius had asked what signal Cawl would use to indicate success, the archmagos had laughed. There would be no signal, he said; the cessation of the stilling should suffice.

Five warriors remained with Messinius and Hiax. He kept his eyes fixed on the steady flash of the armed flasks some ninety yards down the stairs. Their pulsing was hypnotic. He felt his attention wander.

A scrape on the stone jerked him awake. According to his chronograph, six minutes had passed without him noticing. He turned to the source of the noise.

A scarab was crawling down the steps. It reached one of the Space Marines. Messinius expected it to pass by. When it rose up slowly, and began passing a beam over the Space Marine's leg, he tensed.

'Stay still,' Messinius commanded.

The construct halted by the globular device hanging from the warrior's belt. The scarab flashed lights at it. Through the fog of the stilling, Messinius noticed that the light the masking globe emitted was no longer constant, but blinking erratically.

Motes of light swirled deep in the scarab's cyclopean eye. The flickering of the masking device stopped, then matched the pattern of the scarab's eye, and went out.

More scarabs appeared, floating down from the ceiling of the stairs.

'This isn't good,' said Hiax. 'Oh, this is not good at all.'

The lights of all their devices began to throb. Messinius' men looked down at them.

'Ready,' Messinius said.

The devices went out.

The scarab by the first Space Marine's leg spread its mandibles wide. A crackling energy field sprang into life between them, and it lunged. The Space Marine punched down hard, smashing the scarab into the stone. Before it could rise up, he stamped upon it, once, twice, breaking it into pieces that he kicked aside.

'Open fire!' Messinius commanded.

Bolter fire flashed in the stairwell, strobing bright yellow, and loud. The scarabs dived at them and were blasted to pieces. His own plasma pistol coughed star fire, splashing the molten remains of a machine up the walls.

‘Cease!’ Messinius shouted. ‘Conserve your ammunition.’

Shattered scarabs covered the ground. Fyceline smoke swirled. The stairwell wall raced with green patterns that had not been there moments before.

‘An alarm,’ said Hiax.

‘We are discovered,’ Messinius said. ‘All units, fall back. Spare your bolts. We have a hard fight ahead. We have to blow the gates now.’

He detonated the charges in the chambers first. From below came the rushing roar of melta bombs undergoing rapid atomic collapse. He led the way back towards the upper levels. When they were near the top, he blew the two bombs on the stairs. A hot wind chased them the last hundred steps.

The sound of bolt rifles greeted him. The hall flickered with high-energy weapons discharge. They emerged into a pitched battle, the Space Marines and Chul-phi blasting away at necron constructs pouring into the stairhead from every quarter.

‘Retreat! Retreat!’ Messinius commanded. His plasma gun seared a burning line across the space, hitting a larger, vaguely arachnid machine between a cluster of sinister eye-lenses. The head melted, and the thing clanged down. Immediately its skin began to crawl and scarabs dropped onto it, playing reconstruction beams over the damage. He had time to see the mechanism rebuilding itself before he ran past. He slammed a scarab to the ground, his power fist obliterating it. ‘Back to the surface. Door units, hold ground until we are clear of the pyramid. Prepare to retreat to the evacuation point.’

His men fell in around him, disciplined as always, each one covering the next. They fired in short, sharp bursts. Chul-phi waded through the fray, his powered melee weapons scissoring the enemy to pieces, but he was slow, and so was Osel-den. It had been a mistake to bring them.

They fought their way into the corridor leading up to the gate. One of his men fell, mobbed by scarabs that took him methodically apart. He writhed under their mandible fields. They stripped him away layer by layer, his armour frittering into nothing, then his flesh. He fought on, until the pain became too much even for a Space Marine and he screamed out his last

breaths. When the scarabs withdrew, there was nothing left but a slick on the noctilith.

Messinius' vox was alive with the shouts of his men, but all was distorted. A hiss of alien communication broke up their words, rendering them meaningless. The constructs were no longer silent, but chittering high-pitched noises.

They reached the corridor, annihilating the constructs inside it as they advanced. His men formed a double line, five across, using each other as cover, destroying everything that came against them. Behind Messinius, the formation was repeated. At least in the corridor they had some respite. The enemy could not attack in crowds, but were forced into a dense mass that was easy to shatter. Broken machines crunched under their feet. Even as they passed over the wreckage, they were beginning to crawl back together.

Messinius struggled against the stilling. When the wraiths came, as Hiax said they would, phasing directly through the walls into their formation's midst, he was nearly skewered upon their blades. His reflexes took over, and when awareness crept back, his foes were broken. These hit-and-run strikes persisted as they marched. Twenty minutes it took. Ammunition counters blurred down. His men began swapping magazines. Combat knives flashed as guns finally ran dry.

'Press on, press on!' he urged, and shoved his way to the front. His fist at least was powered by his battle plate reactor. He need not fear running out of ammunition for that, but the stilling dragged at him, and every swing was ponderous.

They neared the surface. The vox cleared a little. Messinius heard his squads there engaged in battle over their comms, then the racket of their guns reached his ears directly. They emerged into the gate hall, where hundreds of regenerating constructs twitched on the ground.

Half the men he had left to hold the entrance were dead.

Hiax was fiddling with some esoteric piece of equipment. 'The dimensional gates are still inactive. That is a little good news.'

'Lord!' Thothven called to him. He lived, at least. He pointed upward. The machines were breaking off from their attack.

Messinius looked overhead at hundreds of constructs flooding down the corridor back the way they had come.

'What are they doing?'

‘Without direction from the higher forms of necron, the canoptek constructs are limited in behaviour. They do not perceive us as much of a threat. For them, repairing damage to the complex is a higher priority than killing us,’ Hiax explained.

‘Then the gates will not be closed for long,’ Messinius said. ‘Quickly!’ he commanded. ‘While the way is clear.’

His Apothecary worked quickly to harvest the gene-seed of the dead. He ordered him to cease. There was no time.

The surviving men hurried out. Agitated necron machines flew in long streams towards the evacuation point where the gunships waited. The steady clatter of bolters and autocannons drifted up from the ridge, far below.

‘You were wrong, magos,’ said Messinius. ‘Their priority is destroying our means of escape, then they may slaughter us at their leisure.’

‘We should call in the gunships to collect us, and abort the mission now,’ said Hiax.

‘They will die coming to rescue us,’ said Messinius. ‘They must leave. We shall have to find another means of escape.’

He voxed his men on the ridge below. The firefight there intensified. The Thunderhawks cycled up their engines, and began to lift off. Men ran aboard, still firing. Messinius considered his course of action. None of his options were good.

‘We are going to protect the archmagos. We have to win this battle. If he fails, all is lost. If he succeeds, we might yet escape.’

The Thunderhawks were still firing as they took off. One vanished under a cloak of writhing metal, its exploding engines muffled by their sheer mass. It fell, visibly shrinking, consumed as it plummeted. The others speared upwards, chased by streams of machines.

‘My lord, we will not make it. Already the machines are turning this way.’

Messinius looked over the battlefield. Thothven was right.

‘Then we hold the gate here, kill as many as we can, and pray to the Emperor that the distraction will buy the archmagos a little more time.’

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Chapter Thirty-Six

A RESPITE

ATHAGEY RESPONDS

DEEPER IN

For the first time in her life, Cassandra VanLeskus did not know what to do. The sensation only lasted an instant, but it unnerved her.

Necron ships were coming at the *Precept Magnificat* from every side. They had identified who the commander of the fleet was, and they meant to take her head.

‘Orders, fleetmistress?’

Think, she told herself. The first volleys of energy weapons fire scorched over the void shields. They flexed, burned with the unnatural colours of the warp, but held.

‘Call in all battle groups on this position. They mean to kill me, very well. We shall act as bait. Encircle them, inward sphere, prevent their escape.’

‘Aye aye, fleetmistress!’

She strode up and down her command platform.

‘Delpharis, come about, full force. Shield the flagship.’

Klaxons whooped through the hymns being sung by choirs of priests and servitors with perfectly modulated voices. They had been singing since the

beginning of the engagement. Every time the crew felt the stilling creep over them, the choirs sang louder. Prayers were heard as much as orders.

The ship was still struggling away from Paradyce II.

‘We need to get out of this damn gravity well,’ she yelled. ‘Get us up! Up, I say!’

Out there, through the oculus, the abandoned transports burned, gutted by weapons more powerful than any she knew existed. Flecks of burning material dropped from them and fell towards the ground. It was hard not to think of them as bodies.

She weighed her options. This was an unknown foe. No other race, no matter their method of propulsion, could approach a world so closely and come to a dead stop, then immediately engage in battle. From black slots in their sides, swarms of attack craft sped. Already, half the ships were making close, in-atmosphere passes over the planet, shedding landing craft like seeds shaken from plants. There did not seem to be any difference between the ships’ roles. They were multipurpose, and that meant no weak links she could break.

There had been so few engagements with the necrons. She had read of these capabilities, but always they were defeated or driven off, because, she thought, they came in small fleets. This was not a small fleet.

‘What by the Emperor are we fighting here?’ she hissed.

Nervous faces glanced up at her. She needed to keep a check on her fear.

‘All power to ventral thrusters!’ the Master of Engines roared. Tech-priests chittered their assent. The *Precept Magnificat* shuddered as it pushed against the drag of the world beneath its keel.

‘Launch the fighters, for the Emperor’s sake!’ VanLeskus said. ‘Can nobody see the enemy’s intent to interdict us but I? Do your jobs, ladies and gentlemen!’

Ships shot out from the Oberon-class battleship’s numerous flight decks. Many were caught and burned in the void by the onrushing swarms of necron attack ships. The rest were fighting for their lives from the very first moment.

‘Enemy cruiser beginning attack run,’ the Master Augurum warned.

Normally she would have acidly said she had seen that too, but she had not. There was simply too much going on in the battlesphere to keep track of it all herself.

‘Target, full lance battery strike,’ she commanded. ‘Fend it off. Let’s see if we can lure it into making a pass by our broadsides. *Prideful* and *Filius Terrae*, line yourselves up. Let’s hammer it from three sides and see how they like that.’

The ship shook again, this time with void generators working at full capacity. Green lightning raced all around the shield bubble of the battleship.

‘First void bank holding!’ the Master Scutum called.

Lance fire replied to the necron ship’s insult. Yellow beams against its green. The weird, segmented shield patterns of the necron ship blazed around its forked form, and dissipated the hit without it taking damage.

There was a titanic detonation out over the pole, bright as a rising sun. It swelled and shrank in twice as fast, leaving fragments of shattered alien metal spinning away into the dark.

‘Nova cannon hit from the *Audric!* Grunfeld is here!’

‘Old bastard,’ VanLeskus said with a grin. ‘That was a fine shot.’

Grunfeld’s Battle Group Delpharis was rising over the nightside of Paradyce II in a flock of belligerent stars. Torpedoes sped ahead of them, lance fire flicking past.

She called up a hololith.

‘Grunfeld, Grunfeld! Bracket these metal xenos fiends and let’s take them apart.’

The lithic projection was a broken mess, and Grunfeld’s reply an incomprehensible squawk.

‘We’re not getting through, madam. Something is interfering with the warp carrier stream.’

‘Never mind, he knows what he’s about. Begin turn.’

The necron cruiser strafed the battleship once more as it sped by. A flight of destroyers chased it, spitting fire in its wake. These in turn were harried by necron scythe craft. As she watched, one of the destroyers was cut apart by intersecting beams.

‘Port broadside open fire! Keep tracking with the lance turrets. All weapons, away!’

Prideful was not yet in position, but *Filius Terrae* came smoothly over the top of the *Precept Magnificat* and the necron cruiser. By the Emperor, she thought, it was fast. *Filius Terrae* fired its broadsides as it came, a wide

spread, some of which hit directly, the others exploding into sub-munitions that the cruiser flew right into, and these detonated again. The shields flickered weakly.

‘Fire! Fire! Fire!’ VanLeskus screamed.

Lances and heavy shot smashed into the cruiser. They were so close to it, thousands of yards maybe, an insanely close pass, that the two forms of destruction hit close together. The shields of the alien vessel blinked out, and it took damage all along its hull.

There was no outgassing, no fire. The necrons were not alive. They needed no air to sustain them, but their ship was hurt, and its engines misfired, tipping it forward and sending it into a wild spin. A slow Imperial ship would have been able to check itself in time, she thought. There was a disadvantage to their marvellous motive systems.

Bombers swarmed, their Lightning escorts chasing away necron scythe craft. Enveloped by a thousand blistered explosions, the cruiser shattered before it could teleport, and drifted away in fragments.

‘Two down, ten to go,’ she said. ‘If we keep this up, I’ll have another fine victory.’

The necrons came in waves, a glittering horde of metal, eyes glowing pitilessly in deep sockets.

The Sisters rallied the defenders to the central command bunker. They sang as they fought, declaring their love and loyalty to the Emperor of Mankind, and in doing so inspired the Astra Militarum. The pylons erected on the world continued to put out their baleful influence, but the men were less keenly affected. Their hearts brimmed with renewed faith.

Or so Shanni believed.

She and her surviving faithful held a section of trench near the bunker. There were so few of them left. There was less than a tenth of the three thousand from the drop-cathedral remaining. They fought shoulder to shoulder with the Astra Militarum regiments. The man beside her, a veteran, tried to speak to her even as the energy beams flew at the trench and turned the soil to glass.

She ignored him, and sang louder.

Periodically, buzzing swarms of the smaller abominations swept in over the skeletal war forms. A line of Sentinels stationed behind the trench

thinned them out with plasma fire. Frantic las-beams drove the rest back, although a few got through each time, and one by one the Sentinels fell silent, and the xenos machines got several paces closer.

Green coruscations stripped men and women to gory scraps, layer by layer, revealing the horrific inner truths of biology. Still the faithful sang. They sang as the enemies they shot crawled back together by means of xenos sorcery. They sang as the aliens clawed their way unthinkingly up the earthen banks. They sang as the same claws sank into human flesh and ripped it apart, so that the mud ran red.

Shanni fired and fired and fired, until her weapon could fire no more.

She blinked. There was a stinking vapour thick over the field. Promethium fumes, burned metal, blood, and opened guts. Necron machines lay shattered before the trenchline. One lay, not far from her position, its head neatly drilled by heavy las-fire, eye fires extinguished.

Whistles blew.

‘Fall back!’ A man’s voice, full of panic. ‘Fall back to the second line! Destroyers! Destroyers inbound!’

She had no idea what a destroyer was. The name suggested nothing good.

Men jogged past her, shoved her; the man who had tried to speak with her practically threw her to the ground, wild with panic. Shanni did not move. She had no fear. She was of the faithful. No xenos evil could frighten her.

She peered out into the mist, that terrible brume of atomised flesh and metal.

Green flashing blades. That was what she saw first. Green flashing blades as large as doors borne by terrible, stalking things. They moved through the debris surefootedly. She felt their cold regard on her, before they broke into a run.

‘Get out of here!’ The veteran turned back. ‘Get out of here or die!’ He grabbed her, and pulled her. Some of his fear infected her. She felt it, a cold shaking, a need to be safe.

So she ran, but she did not panic, not then. *If I run*, she thought, *then I shall fight some more before this day is out.*

‘Emperor! Emperor!’ she shouted skyward. ‘Emperor!’

Heavy weapons behind the line fired at the things in the mist. One fell, shattered. The rest galloped, shrieking, endlessly shrieking.

Shanni ran.

Battle Group Iolus moved in tight formation towards Paradyce II. Necron wreckage floated around them, only a single ship, caught off-guard. Good for morale, though the price was a brace of Athagey's escorts. They left behind two expanding clouds of gas.

'Main enemy concentration is around Paradyce II,' Diomed informed her.

'Then they are going for the command ship,' Athagey said. 'How far out are we?'

'Three hours at full burn,' said Diomed. 'We're slightly closer to Paradyce Station. Strike Force Antiphone of Delpharis is under heavy attack there.'

'Delpharis will have to see to its own, Finnula. We are going to help VanLeskus.' Athagey settled into her command throne. 'Because the thought of the look on VanLeskus' face when I save her arse from the fire is just too tempting to pass up.'

Messinius and his men were beset. They had already taken heavy casualties when Hiax came to Messinius and shouted over the noise of battle.

'We'll never survive here,' he said. 'We must move on.'

'Where to?' said Messinius. He let fire with a plasma stream, burning out the centre of a scuttling, multi-legged thing that was busily reassembling the scarabs his men had slain. 'We cannot go out. This gateway offers at least a chance to hold.'

'We hold, we die. We need to join forces with Cawl.'

'I am open to your suggestions.' He swung his power fist, breaking a trio of scarabs into a million fragments.

Hiax began to explain, and gave up. 'Trust me. We can't go out, so we go deeper. These pyramids are all interlinked. We can get to him, make a stand in force.'

'He's late,' said Messinius.

'What he is doing has never been attempted before. He'll succeed.'

A burst of bolt-fire from one of Thothven's men marked a brief lull in the fighting, though on Messinius' sensorium, red indicators marked the imminent arrival of thousands more enemies.

'How certain are you of this?'

'Nearly completely.'

Messinius flicked the dump switch on his plasma pistol. Blistering white steam roared out of its emergency coolant vents. The gun whined as it

refilled. Smaller plasma weapons had an impressive ammunition capacity, but it was not infinite. Either the coolant ran out, or the gas the coils heated, and he was nearly out of both. It was possible to harvest them from air, but that took time, and time they did not have.

‘Show me the way,’ Messinius said.

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Chapter Thirty-Seven

STAR EMPIRE

KALLIDES

OUTMATCHED

In the Grand Strategium, Guilliman looked on.

The void was filling with alien craft. The first arrived in tight formations. By some effect of speed upon a man's perception of light, their hulls appeared stretched out, as if they were pieces of elastic rope that only snapped back into normal form when the prows ceased moving.

At the core of the formation was a truly massive vessel. It was as large as a battle station, and black as the void it plied. Only the row upon row of green lights that covered it allowed it to be seen against the eternities of space, picking out the vastness of its hull with baleful alien energies.

The cartolith danced, losing coherency, a subtle shift of light saw its colour change. The hues of stars and runic icons bled away, taking on a viridian tint.

A minor tech-adept began shouting prayers. A more level-headed member of Guilliman's staff turned to him. 'We are losing control of the hololith, my lord.'

The whole spherical projection space in the Grand Strategium fizzled with violent green energies. Tech-priests raced for consoles, only to be thrown

back by spears of lightning that burned away their organics and left them as smoking heaps of components on the deck. Men and women shouted at each other, trying to wrest back control of the machine, but Guilliman's voice cut through the tortured roar of static and panic.

'Stand back from your stations! Do not risk yourselves.'

Commanded by the lord of the Imperium, they stood down.

Colquan growled out at Guilliman's side, 'This is not wise.'

'They are attempting to communicate,' Guilliman said. 'It is always wise to hear out the enemy, however objectionable that might be. Do not worry, tribune. We shall isolate the strategium displays. The alien shall find no way into the ship's informational spaces by guile. I will hear their message. I have no intention of handing control of my vessel to them.'

Tech-priests were working hard to block off the hololith from the rest of the *Dawn of Fire*'s systems. Servitors disengaged enormous brass circuit links. Sparks arced between the separated halves as they parted. The scent of ozone permeated everything.

One of the higher magi stepped back over the smoking remains of his minions and threw up a number of limbs. 'Systems isolated! Hail the Machine God!'

A huge image manifested in the hololithic pit. It looked down on the primarch with burning green eyes. Upon its head was a crown of blades. It hung there a moment, glowering, then the image shrank in on itself, showing the same being standing upon a blackstone dais. Two lesser lords stood either side. They were big, but only half the size of their master. One of these now spoke.

'Hear now this call to parley, lesser beings, and be glad of my liege's mercy. I am Hapthatra the Radiant, Triarch of the necrons, and servant of Szarekh, the Silent King.'

Hapthatra gestured to the greater necron between him and his companion.

'Szarekh is mighty. Szarekh is eternal. Szarekh is the breaker of gods and reshaper of worlds. Hear his name and tremble, for his coming presages your doom. Heed him, and you shall be permitted to live as rightful slaves of the necrons. Heed him not, and all shall perish.'

Guilliman stepped forward on his grav-stage.

'I am Roboute Guilliman, Thirteenth Primarch. I shall hear you.'

'Then you are wise, Roboute Guilliman. Do you speak for your species?'

‘I am Regent of the Imperium of Mankind. I speak for my people, we who rule this galaxy.’

Hapthatra laughed. His face did not move, could not, and the sound was all the more grotesque for it.

‘We know of your Imperium. You are primitives who squat upon our worlds and plunder our resources. Your realm is nothing. Compared to the majesty of the Necron Star Empire, you are weak and growing weaker. Your technology is primitive. We see signs of your kind everywhere, yet the worlds you occupy are few in this era. You are a race who has fallen, and refuse to acknowledge it. Let it be known that at your peak, you would still have been nothing to us. Be grateful the Silent King is wise and just, or we would have destroyed you immediately without this offer of mercy.’

‘Then I assume you have not come here to surrender.’

‘Do not mock us, human.’

‘State then your terms.’

‘Hear this. Szarekh, lord of all the necron race, demands the following. You trespass in the sovereign territories of the Nihilakh Dynasty, who owe fealty to us. Depart this place immediately. No further attempt to penetrate the contra-empyrical nexus shall be made. Any ship or colony found within its bounds shall be destroyed. Return, and your vessels and your warriors shall be destroyed.’

‘What of the people who inhabited worlds in this sector?’

‘They are our property. They shall remain so in recompense for your actions. The remainder will be permitted to live.’

‘As allies then, of the great and powerful necron people?’

‘We have no need of allies.’

‘As friends?’ said Guilliman.

‘Neither friends nor allies, but supplicants. Your populations and your materials shall be tithed. Go now, and we shall make arrangements to receive an embassy from you at a time to be determined, with which we shall negotiate the surrender and subjugation of the Imperium of Man to the Necron Star Empire.’

A sense of palpable outrage settled in the chamber. No person spoke.

‘We have fought and beaten many species who sought to dominate us,’ said Guilliman. ‘They were destroyed.’

‘In the past. Our astromancers have reconstructed the quantum trails of your existence. Your history is known better to us than it is to you. You are a species far past its peak of power. You cannot even end your petty civil war after ten thousand years. You are prey to the non-entities of the warp, and you have never, ever faced the likes of us, the true masters of this galaxy. Witness.’

A hundred small images sprang up around the Silent King. They showed war, only war: a small, fatal interaction between a terrified Guardsman and a necron warrior; a flight of skimming, centauroid necrons blazing fire. Ships ablaze from stem to stern; tall, gangling androids materialising aboard command decks; tanks detonating; an entire fleet under heavy attack, and more, so many images, all of defeat and despair.

‘This is the fleet you call Kallides,’ said Hapthatra. *‘See your defeats. They are beaten.’*

‘But they live,’ said Guilliman.

‘It is in our power to snuff them out, as we shall snuff you out.’

Guilliman smiled coldly. ‘Yet you have not. They have penetrated this most important realm of yours and they still fight. You bring evidence of your own limitations and present it as mercy. We shall not surrender. Not now, nor ever. Humanity has one master and one master alone. He is the Emperor, and He sits eternally upon His Golden Throne.’

‘Ten thousand years is not an eternity. Your master is an aberrant mutant, and you are his construct. You snarl at the face of true power, animal. The Silent King asks again, so merciful is he. Will you surrender?’

‘Never. Do you hear?’ Guilliman said. He moved forward, and the Armour of Fate growled, as if it shared his displeasure. ‘Humanity is the master of the stars. Your time has passed.’

The three necron lords looked down upon the primarch. The giant king said nothing, did not move, but the single orbs of his courtiers’ eyes flashed. They both stiffened into immobility for a second.

‘Very well,’ said Hapthatra. *‘Hear the word of the Silent King. Examples of your kind will be maintained in the royal menagerie for posterity. The rest of you shall be exterminated.’*

The hololith went out. Despite the efforts of the technicians and tech-priests to return normal function, the device remained inactive.

‘They make their move, and in doing so expose their leader,’ said Guilliman.

Colquan narrowed his eyes. ‘You cannot mean to engage.’

‘No. We are hopelessly outnumbered,’ said Guilliman. ‘We shall begin a fighting withdrawal. We need to keep the necrons occupied long enough that Cawl may complete his task, but we shall not risk the fleet.’

Guilliman regarded a screen where an image of the enemy flagship was displayed.

‘We know who their ruler is. We know how to find him. One day, we shall kill him, and the necron threat will end. Today is not that day. Our objectives are achieved. They are distracted. Cawl will succeed. Give the order to retreat.’

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Chapter Thirty-Eight

FINAL MOMENTS

A NEW WEAPON

FLEETMISTRESS

Battle raged ferociously around Paradyce II. Two battle groups intersected, expertly timed volleys of fire hammering the necron ships. Three alien craft were gone, either destroyed or phased away to whatever distant port they called home. The price had been incalculably high. Paradyce II was wreathed with the wreckage of Imperial vessels. Meteors of metal and human bodies burned up as they fell to the planet, and the world sparkled with fiery rains.

The *Precept Magnificat* suffered. The ship groaned in pain, its void generators crying so loudly they could hear them on the command deck. Fires burned on several levels. A huge divot of metal had been carved out of the side, leaving the core structure dangerously weakened. Air gushed from a hundred lesser wounds. Cornered like a beast, *Precept Magnificat* fought like one.

‘Enemy target Three A ascending to ventral attack run,’ shouted someone, somewhere on the deck. Who it was could not be discerned. Smoke hazed VanLeskus’ vision and made the hololiths tremble. The oculus was cracked, but she dared not order the shutters closed. The necrons employed some

kind of augur baffle, so their images slid slyly over the displays, never in the exact place they truly were, out in the void. She needed to see them to kill them.

‘Then drive it back!’ VanLeskus roared.

‘*Evident Recourse* is out of control, heading our way!’

‘Evasive action!’

The ship squealed, integrity fields and metal equally stressed. A cruiser came at them, yawing slowly, side-on, ablaze on every deck from the prow to the engine stacks. The *Precept Magnificat* dived under it. The ship continued its slow roll overhead. VanLeskus prayed it would not detonate. At that range, their stressed void shields would be overwhelmed, but the dying ship sailed out through the clutter of ships and debris into open space.

Another ship was not so lucky. Its reactor blew spectacularly over the horizon, the dazzling sphere of its death peeking shyly over the round world.

‘New vessel, on approach. Emperor, Emperor!’

VanLeskus caught the panic of the officer, zeroed in on the new craft, and understood why he called upon their god.

All the ships engaging them so far had been of roughly cruiser gravitic displacement. This was immense, equal to the *Precept Magnificat*. Like a huge version of the necron fighter ships, it was crescent-shaped, with a cluster of pyramids at the centre on both dorsal and ventral facings, presumably its command centres. She recalled the Imperial designation: a tomb ship, something faced by humanity only a handful of times in open void combat.

‘They mean to finish us off,’ she said to herself. ‘That has to be their flagship. Attack it. Bring it down!’

Glances passed between the crew. They were close to breaking. Never before had they faced so few ships and taken so much damage. At VanLeskus’ command in that system were enough voidships to conquer half a segmentum, but the necrons, with half as many vessels, were tearing them apart. There were engagements all over the system, on every world, enemy ships hurtling in from deep space at impossible superluminal speeds and joining the fight.

‘I said, bring it down!’ She looked over her displays. They were a mess of breaking lines and corrupted data, but they told her enough. ‘Bring it down!

We can do it! Iolus is on direct intercept course. We've got enough. We can do it. Fleet Tertius!' she shouted, and stood at the very front of her command dais. 'I have never lost a battle, and will not lose this one. Begin attack run. These aliens are not like us. Destroy their higher forms, and the rest are mindless machines.'

There were no cheers, no last hurrahs, but the crew steadied, and set to their tasks.

Curse it all to be caught so close to the planet, she thought. She took a little comfort knowing that next time, the capabilities of this enemy might be better known, and that next time, victory would be easier. It wouldn't be her victory, though.

She intended to be around to see that day. She intended to–

'Enemy vessel deploying weaponry!'

VanLeskus' eyes snapped back to her nearest display. On a small hololith, she watched tall obelisks extend from the top and bottom of the necron ship. They locked into place.

'Energy spike detected…' The voice of the officer rose in pitch. 'By the Throne, it is off the–'

The Master Augurum never finished. A concentrated beam of black-purple light lashed out across the battlesphere. It hit the *Kallimenes* first, and under its touch the void shields blinked out.

Then it was the *Precept Magnificat*'s turn.

The beam touched. The voids imploded. The beam ran through the ship as if the solid matter of it, the metal and bodies that made it, were not there at all. It operated on a different plane, in the stuff of the warp, and corroded the souls of everyone aboard.

VanLeskus felt as if she had been torn up out of her body. She saw herself from above, before she spun over and over, thrown somewhere far away yet terrifyingly close, where she witnessed a vision of hell: a seethe of spirits, racing madly, predators laughing in the night, endless, nonsensical landscapes where things with nightmares for teeth hunted endlessly, tirelessly, and they hunted for her.

There was a flash, and she felt herself fall. The impact jerked her limbs all together.

She was on the floor. Alarms blared in every quadrant. With nerveless fingers, she grasped a stanchion holding up her run of displays and hauled

herself up.

‘Prepare to return fire!’ The words were an inarticulate moan. Her tongue lolled, and would not go back into her mouth. Saliva sheeted down her face.

She crawled onto the displays, her legs spasming, refusing to support her.

Her crew were down, all of them. They lay on the floor, catatonic, some clearly dead, others fitting, foam flecking their mouths. A rare few, like her, were stumbling back to their feet with looks of the purest horror on their faces.

The enemy flagship waited, the twin horns of its crescent spread to receive them, as if it wished to swallow them whole.

She tried to stand fully, but could not. The voids were gone. The crew were incapacitated.

This was it. She was going to die.

Three swift necron cruisers were running a gauntlet of fire from the flagship’s escorts, and coming right at her. One burst apart. The others approached unharmed.

Powerful beam weapons flashed. She had time to regret that her husband wasn’t there. She would have liked to have held his hand in that last moment, which was peculiar, because she had never wanted to do so before.

Her last thoughts were full of regrets.

The oculus burst in. The beams decapitated the *Precept Magnificat*, sending the towers of its superstructure tumbling away into space. The cruisers slowed, flying alongside, beams continuing to burn remorselessly down the length of the defenceless flagship, ripping up fire and white streamers of gas, before something crucial was compromised, and the reactor detonated with the force of a dying star.

Athagey half stood from her throne.

Three ship deaths in quick succession, each one a perfect round of light that winked out as soon as it came. A fourth shone brighter, and larger, its glow as momentous as the last sunrise on a dying world.

VanLeskus. That was VanLeskus’ ship.

‘By the Emperor…’ Athagey breathed. ‘It’s slaughter.’

She hardly heard the words of her staff officers reporting from nearby.

‘We’ve lost the *Precept Magnificat*! VanLeskus is dead. Battle Group Alphus nearing complete destruction.’

Her hololith was a horror of dead and drifting vessels. The pathetic remainders of Battle Group Alphus were attempting to flee. Paradyce II's atmosphere had so much debris hitting it, it seemed to be on fire.

'We're too late,' said Diomed.

'What happened?' Athagey demanded. 'Someone tell me what happened!'

'I hypothesise some sort of contra-empyric weaponry deployed to collapse the fleet's void shields,' her chief transmechanic, High Magos Drusis Alofex said. One of his servo-skulls came humming over. His voice came out of its mouth. 'Any effect strong enough to cause void collapse will have had disastrous effects on the crew.'

'The stilling.'

'A variant of increased potency, yes. Direct contact with a negatively charged empyrical beam of that magnitude will have been fatal in around ten per cent of casualties.'

'Non-fatal casualties?'

'One hundred per cent, groupmistress. They will have been incapacitated at the very least.'

Athagey watched the battle unfolding.

'What is the status of the other groupmasters?'

'Grunfeld is certainly dead,' Diomed said. 'We are getting no reading for his ship's signum code around Paradyce II. The others?' Her eyes flicked over a number of hololithic displays depicting further battle group actions. 'It is hard to say. Hololithic data is disrupted, we are on a four-hour, forty-eight-minute luminal delay on lightspeed means of communication on the nearest, ranging up to nine hours for the most distant. We are updating as we can, but the enemy are employing augury disruptors. Hololithic comms are offline.'

'Total ship losses across Crusade Fleet Tertius?'

'Approaching sixty per cent and rising, Eloise, at our best estimate,' said Diomed. She glanced up, pale-faced. She spoke quietly, in danger of lapsing into shock.

For once, Athagey did not dress down Diomed for using her first name on the command deck. Instead, she nodded in understanding. Her reaction would have been the same, if she could have allowed herself to show it.

She smoothed her tunic down. 'Get me direct communications with the remaining battle groups. I will assume command of the fleet. In length of

service terms, I outranked all but Grunfeld. It is my right. I am going to order a general withdrawal. This diversion has turned into a disaster. The system is lost. We must preserve what ships we can.'

'Yes, group…' Diomed caught herself. 'Fleetmistress,' she said with a tight smile. Athagey returned it.

'Communications open, widecast, whole fleet,' reported the Master Vox.

Athagey repositioned herself in her throne, and attempted to look regal.

'Begin transmission.'

'Transmission active.'

'Ladies and gentlemen of Fleet Tertius. This is Groupmistress Eloise Athagey of Battle Group Saint Aster.' She used the old name purposefully, and with pride. 'Acting fleetmistress. VanLeskus is dead. This system is lost. Withdraw. Get out while you can. Preserve your strength so that you might know vengeance in the future. Go with speed, go with honour, in full knowledge that your service has been noted. The Emperor protects.' She nodded at Diomed, who cut the signal. 'Leave it on repeat, three times a minute.'

'Orders for Iolus, fleetmistress?' Lieutenant Hainkin asked. He was pale. They were all terrified. She'd never liked him much. He was too sure of his own abilities, and unreliable because of it, but she smiled at him with kindness.

'Continue on intercept course for Paradyce II.'

Heads turned her way from every quarter. Athagey stared dead ahead, not wishing to look into their eyes while she delivered this death sentence to every man and woman on the bridge. She couldn't do that. Not now. Not after so long.

'If we do not stop that ship putting out contra-empyric beams, every vessel left to us is at risk. They will lose their void shields. Imagine if it chases us to the Mandeville points. How will we gain the warp? The Emperor expects you all to do your duty, as I shall do mine.' She stood up, addressing her words still to the oculus and the devastation unfolding outside. 'We are closest. We retain most of our strength. Bring our remaining ships into attack formation. We destroy that pylon ship and save what we can of our people, or we shall die in the attempt. I swear this by my oaths to the Golden Throne and to Terra. Are you with me?'

Now she swept her gaze across the sea of faces at their workstations, uplit by the data of war, each one at first anxious, then hardening with resolve. This was the fate of all humanity in this dark and terrible time, to fight until they could fight no more, so that others might come after them, and fight on.

‘I asked, are you with me?’ Athagey shouted.

‘Aye.’ It was Diomed who spoke. Her voice quavered. She cleared her voice, and said again, clearly and with growing strength, ‘Aye, fleetmistress!’

‘Aye!’ came the shout. ‘Aye! Aye! Aye!’

‘Very well. All power to engines. Begin attack run.’

So were given Eloise Athagey’s first and last orders as Fleetmistress of Crusade Fleet Tertius.

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Chapter Thirty-Nine

TESTED

BAITED TRAP

A FRIEND

Guilliman was watching the battle in the lower strategium as waves of necron cruiser squadrons probed at the edges of Battle Group Alpharis. The Imperial fleet was moving with speed towards the edge of the system, where it might translate safely into the warp. No large attack had occurred yet. Khestrin tried to read the primarch's expression but could not. It was as inscrutable as a statue's.

'This was a mistake,' Colquan growled. 'You put the whole Imperium at risk again by your need for combat.'

'It is a calculated risk,' Guilliman said. 'They cannot ignore me. Why do you think I came here in the first place? Simply to do it all myself? To flex my muscles and show my power?' He looked away from the hololith. 'They have to respond to my presence. Meanwhile, Cawl is doing his job. We must do ours.'

'If you die, it will mean the loss of the species,' said Colquan.

'Something you have said many times to me before, and will no doubt say so again. Better, do you think, that I remain in the palace on Terra for ten thousand years and watch the Imperium fall, safely behind my walls? We

live in an era of ending, tribune. We cannot stop the tide of darkness with a barrier of timidity.’

He turned back to the unfolding picture of the battle. Khestrin could feel Colquan’s anger like a physical force. It frightened him. He noticed it was affecting the rest of the staff. He stared at Colquan. Colquan glanced in his direction, and seemed to understand.

‘My lord, forgive my choler,’ he said, though it rang hollow. ‘If you will allow, I should prepare plans for your evacuation.’

Guilliman looked at him.

‘Just in case,’ said Colquan.

A dying ship filled the command deck below with sheet lightning.

Guilliman nodded. ‘Do it, though it pains me to admit it is necessary. These xenos are advanced. It would pay to be cautious, and cover all eventualities.’

Colquan nodded, and departed to make arrangements. Khestrin was relieved the source of the tension was gone. Guilliman continued to stare into the cartolith. When Colquan was out of hearing, Guilliman spoke to Khestrin.

‘He is right,’ he said quietly. ‘We have overstretched ourselves. These ships, the way they move. I did not think such things were possible. I have never seen anything like them before, and I fought many advanced beings in the Great Crusade.’

‘We are within a few hours of the Mandeville point, my lord,’ said Khestrin. ‘We are well protected. Betaris and Epsilis cover our flanks. The necrons attack but they are being held at bay. We should be able to withdraw.’

‘I do not share your analysis,’ Guilliman said. ‘They are testing us. These attack runs are shallow. They are not attempting full penetration of our formations, though they could achieve it.’ He pointed to the icons denoting necron flotillas. ‘They could take us now, if they desired. Their flagship has not joined battle yet. We have seen how manoeuvrable they are, there is no reason to believe the flagship does not share these capabilities. It could tip the course of battle alone. Therefore, we must assume it is hanging back purposefully.’

‘Then the question is why?’ asked Khestrin. ‘If you believe they could overwhelm us now, why give us this opportunity to escape?’

‘Because they do not mean to kill us,’ said Guilliman. ‘Think on the emptied worlds of this sector, Isaiah. There was no sign of slaughter on them. The population was removed. I believe they mean to take us alive.’

‘For what reason?’

‘None good,’ said Guilliman.

‘Then we should increase speed.’

‘Not until I am sure Cawl has been successful and the stilling effect has decreased,’ Guilliman said. ‘The archmagos needs a little more time, and so the bait must remain in the trap.’

‘Move, move, move!’

Messinius slapped the last of his men on his power plant as he ran through the door. Hiax was doing something to it – trying to close it, he hoped, and not absorbed by some petty obsession. He had seen tech-priests blindly trying to acquire knowledge while they were being torn apart. Thothven and Gailin kneeled by the door, snapping off precious bolts. Bullets were a currency spent freely in war. Only now did Messinius appreciate them, when they were so close to penury.

A multi-limbed machine came whirling at them.

The door closed upon it, crushing it flat. Its tick-like head twitched, the neck arched, then the light in its eyes failed.

They were in a modest chamber, little more than a swelling in the long corridor. Some of his men took up position at the far end, their nearly empty guns covering the endless length beyond.

‘We’re here,’ Hiax explained. He projected a small cartolith from an emitter mounted on his shoulder. It showed a display of neat corridors, chambers and halls. A red light denoted their position. ‘The archmagos dominus is here.’ The cartolith moved along, sweeping past what appeared to be miles more passageways. ‘It’s not far,’ he said.

Messinius was unconvinced. ‘It looks far.’

‘Little over two miles,’ Hiax said.

Two miles we will have to fight every step of, Messinius thought. He looked at their party. Twelve Space Marines remained, the rest dead, their gene-seed lost. Sixteen Martians of one sort or another. Many of them were injured. They’d been forced to leave some of his men behind because of

armour damage; they had been unable to keep up. He doubted their heroic rearguard efforts had done much to slow the enemy.

His gaze alighted on Osel-den, the little acolyte of Hiax. He was draped over the pauldron of Brother Invers. Messinius didn't need his sensorium to tell him he was dead.

'Brother Invers, put him down,' he said gently.

Invers complied, not asking why he should, simply obeying. Osel-den sagged on the floor like a discarded sack, his eyes still wide open.

'Your acolyte,' he said to Hiax, who was too busy with his maps to notice. 'He is dead.'

'Surely not,' said Hiax. 'He was only wounded.' His words were completely toneless. Impossible to gauge his emotional response.

'It is so. I am sorry,' said Messinius. The response was automatic. The words meant nothing, he realised. Just another dead man of the thousands upon thousands of dead men he had seen in his service. The thought momentarily sickened him.

'Ah well,' said Hiax, and this time there was a little softness to his voice. He stopped what he was doing, turned and knelt on the front pair of his legs. He stared into the dead man's face a moment, before carefully removing Osel-den's mask and closing his staring eyes. Osel-den's last expression was haunting. He had been afraid. 'He goes to the Machine God, where I pray he may continue his service in perpetuity.'

An alarm sang in Messinius' ear. 'Threat indicators are climbing. The constructs are massing on the other side of the door. It will not hold for long. We go.'

His men stood briskly. Space Marines and cyborgs both showed little sign of weariness, but that would not last forever.

'No,' said Chul-phi.

'We have to leave,' said Hiax. 'The lord lieutenant is right.'

'No.' Chul-phi's fleshless face looked down at the dead acolyte. 'I remain. One last service.'

'For the Machine God.'

'For my comrade,' Chul-phi said.

He set his legs apart, facing the door, about ten feet away from it. He chose this position not for any tactical advantage, but because it was where Osel-den lay.

‘They will pay.’

Hiax made as if to convince him. Messinius grabbed his shoulder. ‘We go now.’

Hesitantly, Hiax nodded. *He is the last of his group*, Messinius realised. *He is alone*. He sympathised. That had been his fate, until recently.

The door juddered up half an inch. The hissing of alien machines insinuated itself under the door. Chul-phi’s weapons whined loudly as they charged.

‘Go!’ he boomed. ‘They will pay, you will live.’

Hiax, Messinius and the rest ran on. They had gained a quarter of a mile when the sound of Chul-phi’s weapons thundered down the corridor. Flashes of light chased up and down the walls. The shooting lasted long enough for Messinius and his warriors to run another quarter of a mile, then abruptly stopped.

Soon after, the enemy was on them again.

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Chapter Forty

SAINT ASTER'S BLESSING

CAUGHT AMIDSHIPS

FINAL FLIGHT

'Get those cruisers off our back!' Athagey demanded.

There were two of the horn-prowed alien ships chasing the *Saint Aster*. Beams of violent energy raked over her void shields. As Athagey drove her battle group deeper into the system, the rest of Fleet Tertius was running, running ahead of the xenos ships, and still the necrons caught them with contemptuous ease. Only Battle Group Jovian was making its way out of system intact, saved by being left in reserve by VanLeskus. The rest of them were being torn apart as they fled. Athagey's darting eye took in casualty figures for them. Alphus: destroyed. Betaris: eighty per cent losses and climbing. Delpharis: destroyed. Battle Group Delphi: forty per cent losses and climbing. Then her own, Iolus. With three capital ships dead in the void and one atomised, they too were approaching total annihilation.

'Not even that idiot Dionis managed as good a job of destroying his fleet,' she growled to herself.

The ship shuddered with the release of its broadsides. The shields of both sides writhed, the necrons with their weird, green cellular reactions, the *Saint Aster*'s flaring with warp displacement. It was getting hard to see.

A spread of fire from the port gunnery decks chopped into the scythe prow of the necron vessel, shattering one of the horns. It pulled away immediately, but the *Saint Aster*'s gunners predicted its move, and lance beams were already firing into the space it veered into, cutting the whole prow free. The ship shuddered, terminally damaged, shimmered, and was called back whence it came.

'Good work. Keep that other one back,' Athagey ordered.

A blaze of dark blue replied as the second cruiser ran insistent claws of energy over the *Saint Aster*'s void envelope. Again the battleship shook as she fired, causing their harasser to peel away.

The command ship was dead ahead.

'Any sign we've been spotted by the target?'

'Negative. We're passing through dense radiation fields. No indication that their sensors have picked up or extrapolated our course.'

'Their arrogance undoes them,' she said. 'They think we wouldn't dare tackle them head-on.'

'Why would they?' said Diomed primly. 'It's suicide.'

The ship was huge. Blackish purple whips shot out from the tips of the pylons; long, sinuous bands of energy that grew wider as they sped through the void, the ends moving too fast to see. One connected with a flight of Cobra destroyers attempting to get away. The nimbler escort craft had the edge in the rout of Fleet Tertius. It seemed the necrons had noted that.

Their void shields popped like soap bubbles. There was no other effect to the ships themselves. Their nav-lights and the glow of lumens from the portholes continued. Their engines carried on the steady burn of acceleration. For a moment they ploughed on their escape vectors, but then they split apart, following the subtle, unseen curves of gravitic fields and the particle wavefronts of exploding ships without correction, and they fell from their formation. Their crews were almost certainly dead.

It was a disaster, and yet, *and yet*, there was something there, she was sure. A regularity to the waveform of the lash. She reached for the snuff box, but her hand did not enter the pocket. She rested her fingers flat upon the hard box beneath the cloth, then withdrew them.

She did not need her stimms. She would not take them. If she was going to die, let it be with a clear head.

‘Analyse the fire pattern of that beam,’ Athagey commanded. ‘Look for regularities of progression through the void. Anything we can use to avoid it.’

Heads bent over cogitator screens. The *Saint Aster* flew on. Her void shields sparkled like feast day pyrotechnics. The cruiser continued to dog their steps but it too was suffering from the constant bombardment of debris. Expanding clouds of plasma billowed everywhere. Chunks of hull, gun turrets, burning fighters, every conceivable fragment of battle rained down upon them.

‘Voids?’

‘Primary shield at twenty-hundredths,’ her Master Scutum relayed. ‘Two and three at full strength.’

‘Come on, men. Get me the detail on that weapon. They’ll notice us any moment.’

High Magos Drusis Alofex responded.

‘My conclusions are far from finished, my lady, but there does appear to be a predictable motion to the beam when fired. We should have a window of twelve seconds to respond once it has been unleashed. At least, so preliminary data–’

‘Give it to the helm! Prepare for evasive action on my mark. Relay the information to the rest of Iolus. All remaining vessels to provide covering fire while we make our attack run.’

They cleared the last of the debris. The pylon ship was ahead, huge, black, and malevolent, and they were seen. Green sparks danced along its length, a microsecond warning before rays of alien power smashed into their voids. Not the contra-empyric beam, thank the Emperor, but its banks of particle cannon.

The first void flared insanely. The moaning of generators deep in the ship worked their way through the frame. Athagey felt it, bone-deep.

Light strobed over her face, causing her to squint. The quality of the void’s light changed, becoming duller, though somehow no less dazzling, then with a brandy-flame shimmer it gave out.

‘First void down!’ the Master Scutum bellowed.

The ship shuddered, slow, all-pervasive, an animal giving in to pain. They should have broken off their headlong charge, swung about, brought their broadsides to bear and exchanged fire with the enemy until one of them was

too mauled to carry on. That was the usual run of things, but this was no ordinary day. The crew knew what she was doing. There was only one way to cripple the pylon ship quickly enough that the fleet could withdraw.

'Lances, open fire, full forward!' Athagey shouted. Her hands danced over her gel screens. Information poured down her monocle display. 'Enginarium, full power to main drives. All ships, hit it, hit it, hit it hard! Bring its shields down. *Dominant Will*, *Lord Odric*. Target these coordinates on the enemy ship with your nova cannon on my mark.' She selected a well-protected and solid section, but underneath raced currents of energy, according to her auguries. A vulnerability.

They passed an invisible barrier. The stilling dragged at their souls. Athagey's senses dulled. Sound became distant, vision unreal. Still she did not reach for her stimms, even though the snuffbox grew heavier in her pocket.

'Mark,' she said. A targeting data packet flew from the *Saint Aster* to the *Dominant Will*. Ready runes flashed on her screens in return.

The pylon ship's strange xenos protection shimmered with a nervy, pained energy. The vessel was big, easily exceeding the heaviest Imperial battleship class. Wreckage between it and the *Saint Aster* wheeled and danced, confusing the picture, but Athagey estimated it at twelve miles in length, and formidably armoured.

Episcopus Barandus was down on the foredeck surrounded by the ship's lesser priests. They sang while he waved his staff of office, a heavy thing topped with a golden barred 'I', and hurled imprecations at the foe. For once, she did not resent his presence.

'Enemy shield status!' she demanded.

'Holding strong,' reported the Master Augurum. 'Output flicker from their reactors suggest a pattern change.' He consulted his screens again. 'Holding, holding.'

They rushed at the pylon ship, a fortress in space, the will of ancient evil cast in stone and set loose among the stars.

The shields had to fail. The cannon had to hit. Their trajectory had to be perfect. So many factors, so little chance. Their chances of survival were minimal, even if they were successful. But the survival of so many others depended on Athagey and her crew.

Fire from the *Saint Aster* and her last few companion vessels spattered all over the alien shields, revealing more and more of its bizarre cellular matrix. The green grew brighter, and brighter. Was that a good thing? She did not know.

Suddenly, without warning, the green blinked out.

‘Enemy shields down! Repeat, enemy shields down.’

‘Fire! Fire now! All ships, fire!’ she commanded.

A streak of light sped across space, so shortly lived that after it passed it was easy to think it imaginary. At this close range, hitting something with a nova cannon was virtually impossible. The necron ship was less than two hundred miles ahead. Nova cannons were weapons whose optimal range was measured in the hundreds of thousands of miles. Predictably the shell overshot, cutting a thin line of fire into the atmosphere of Paradyce II. An eye-blink later and a towering mushroom cloud was crawling up into the world’s atmosphere. A perfectly circular shockwave spread around the stalk. Paradyce II would bear that scar for a geological age, but that did not matter, for Paradyce II was lost.

‘Damn it!’ Athagey snarled.

Then she realised the *Lord Odric* had yet to fire.

‘Why hasn’t *Lord Odric* let fly?’ she demanded.

‘They report near readiness, my lady. A loading delay.’

‘Then get on with it!’ she screamed. The view forward was a mess of energy hits and shield wash. She couldn’t see anything.

Two ships with nova cannons, two attempts on a near-impossible shot. She was clutching at the finest threads of fate. This wasn’t strategy, this was prayer.

‘Emperor guide them,’ she whispered, then louder, ‘Emperor guide them! Saint Aster, please,’ she pleaded. ‘I have never asked you for much directly. My pride would not allow it. But now, this time, I beg you to intervene. Speak with the Emperor, have Him turn His face towards me just the once, and have Him *see*.’

The other ships fired their forward batteries and lances at the enemy fortress vessel. Yellow rounds of impacts flared and died. They were chewing into the hull, but it wasn’t enough. They needed that second cannon to hit.

‘*Lord Odric* reports nova cannon loaded!’

She drew herself up, fixed her eye on the target, and yelled: ‘Then fire! Fire now!’

Again, the same faint slash of light as a shell propelled at barely subluminal speed cut the void.

This time, the Emperor’s hand closed gently upon the nova cannon round, and guided it into the midsection of the ship.

Each shell took months of manufacture and prayer to prepare. The cost would bankrupt a minor noble house. The skills to make them were known to a staggeringly small number of magi, the facilities required almost as rare. Many times, they missed. But they were so incredibly potent, all that did not matter when one connected with its target.

Athagey was half-blinded by the explosion. They were so close, it filled the oculus from top to bottom with burning white.

The particle wash hit them a microsecond later, its interaction with the voids an audible crackle on the deck. The ship bucked as it passed over them. Alarms whooped.

‘Status report!’ Athagey commanded.

‘Voids holding. Minimal damage to the *Saint Aster*.’

She blinked streaming eyes. Bright after-images marred her sight, but they had hit, by the Emperor, they had hit!

A wide bite had been taken out of the necron hull. Debris scattered from it, mingling with the broken hulls of the Imperial ships it had destroyed. It was listing. Sparks crackled around the wound. Still it fired. Space filled with attack craft streaming in to protect their mothership. Once more the *Saint Aster*’s void shields were burning.

‘Aim for the damaged section. All fleet, prepare torpedoes.’

Alien fire was concentrating off to their left.

‘*Vox Lexica* reports loss of voids. Heavy attack. Heavy damage.’

There was a flash off to the upper right.

‘We’ve lost the *Vox Lexica*.’

Athagey looked over the battlesphere. Only two cruisers remained to support their attack run.

‘Abort?’ Diomed asked.

Athagey gave her a barely perceptible shake of the head.

‘Continue. Forward weapons and lance batteries keep on at that damaged section.’

‘Contra-empyric weapon is charging to fire!’ the Master of Augurum shouted.

‘Begin evasive manoeuvres!’

Directional jets fired all along the length of the *Saint Aster*. Her nose pitched down, so it seemed like the enemy ship and Paradyce II were flying upward. The sudden shift in direction had Athagey clinging on to the railing around her command dais. People were flung about.

The tips of the pyramids pulsed, and the whip of soul-killing energy flicked out. It passed over the top of the *Saint Aster*. Klaxons blared from every side, and through the turmoil of the dive and the dulling effect of the flagship, she heard that the *Dominant Will* had been struck directly.

An Overlord battle cruiser was not designed for such acrobatics, could hardly sustain them, in truth, and the ship howled with the effort. Sparks fountained from consoles as feedback from stressed integrity fields overloaded power conduits.

But they were going to make it.

The whip chased them, the *Saint Aster* slyly avoiding it, running ahead of the path predicted by the high magos. They rolled, moved up. The pylon ship slid back into the centre of the oculus. The sense of dullness intensified with every yard they came nearer. Now it was huge, too big to see it all, the damaged section dead centre of the huge armaglass window.

‘Fire torpedoes!’ she ordered.

Saint Aster and *Coming Light* obeyed. Their torpedoes slid free in two narrow fans. They were immediately set upon by swarms of the necron attack craft. The few remaining Lightning fighters attempted to fight off the necrons, but one by one the missiles were destroyed, exploding with blue-white billows of prematurely released plasma. One flipped end over end, smashing into the *Saint Aster*’s void shields, where it died in a display of displacement flare and star fire.

A clicking alert sounded from Athagey’s cartolith. The *Lord Odric* was peeling away, surrounded by dense swarms of necron fighters. A moment later, its sigil blinked off the display.

Athagey looked ahead. They were so close. Slowly, she stood upright, smoothed her uniform down, and spoke clearly.

‘Enginarium. Full motive.’

Heads rose to look at her. They all knew what that meant, what she intended.

‘Helm,’ she said quietly but firmly, ‘accelerate to ramming speed.’

A silence fell on the bridge. One of intense focus. The prayers of the episcopus changed. The chanting of the priests altered cadence as they began the hymn sung for the conveyance of the souls of the dead into the Emperor’s light.

The enemy ship was a black cliff. At the top was a faint line of light reflected from the planet, but that was swallowed quickly, leaving Athagey with nothing to see but a wall of alien malice. Then that was lost behind the tempest of fire coming in from the foe, and the burning warp flames of failing void shields. They were trying to blow up the *Saint Aster* before it could hit. They might just manage.

She looked at her crew. Sorenkus paced the deck, his beady commissar’s eye glaring at the crew, so absorbed by his duty he was oblivious to what was coming. Ivreus there, whispering to an ensign, who nodded and hurried off, and Diomed, dear Finnula, hunched over the vox, giving orders to the last.

There was a shudder. She knew every motion of her ship intimately, as if it were her own body. That was the Navigatorial escape vessel disengaging. There was no surer sign a ship was doomed than when the Navigators abandoned it.

She closed her eyes. There was a roaring in her ears that had nothing to do with the battle, and everything to do with fear.

She was not ready to die, but that did not matter. Only service mattered. Her death, so that others might fight.

‘Ave Imperator,’ she whispered.

Saint Aster bestowed her final blessing.

The ship that bore her name cleaved into the necron pylon vessel. The ploughshare ram ripped up a gash in the hull, before snagging on something it could not break. The ram bent, and snapped, arresting the *Saint Aster*’s progress enough that she tipped up, but not enough to stop her. The beak of the ship was forced further into the necron craft. It was ripped to pieces as it did so, but it went deep, deep enough that when the torpedoes waiting in their tubes to launch detonated, it blew the necron pylon ship in half.

The ships drifted apart, the pylon ship tumbling slowly in pieces into the embrace of Paradyce II, the *Saint Aster*, headless, drifting up and over its broken foe. Both burned.

Across the fleet, the deadening effect of the pylon ship abated. The necrons lost some part of their collective will, and as humanity rallied, their reactions slackened.

It was just enough to allow the stricken remainder of Crusade Fleet Tertius to flee for the stars.

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Chapter Forty-One

SHANNI FLEES

DEATH MACHINE

SISTERS

They were running before the necrons in a panic. Smoke, flames, ash and the revolting mist of bodily dissolution wrapped blinding tendrils round everything. Green eyes shone out there, on the darkening land. A stream of men flooded through the trenches. Shanni was among them, jostled, shoved into soft walls of earth. Yet atop the command bunker, discipline held sway. Guns blatted from the battlements. She could hear them striking the necrons behind her, metal shattering, the hot, insistent smell of breaking machines. Sometimes, things loomed over the top of the trench and plucked a man away. Behind her, strange lights burned, and collapsed, taking the screams of panicked soldiers with them, leaving an airless space and short-lived silences.

They were being stolen. Shanni was of simple folk, her view of the galaxy was narrow, but though uneducated she was not naive. She did not believe natural human superiority would stand in the way of her death. The aliens could obliterate them easily with their weapons. There had to be a reason why they did not, and every child had heard folktales of the unending hunger of the xenos for human flesh. She never thought to witness it.

She was carried by the human tide round an angle in the trench. From a firing step, a soldier cursed at his fellows, cursed at her as he tried to bring his meltagun around and had his aim ruined by their jostling. Attack craft sped by, the unholy noise their engines made provoking cries of fear from the fleeing soldiers. Shanni was reminded of sermons in the churches that spoke of the sighing of the damned; those who had failed in their service to the Emperor, or shirked their duties to mankind. Forever denied His light, they were cast into the outer nothing where they pleaded an eternity away, hoping for mercy that would never be theirs.

‘Make way!’ the specialist shouted. ‘Make way!’

Something was coming, something heavy. Joints whined under stress. There was a fizzling bang. Screams. She was disoriented. All she could feel was a teeth-itching buzz that made the bone of her jaw hurt.

‘Make way, damn you! Clear the firing line!’

More screaming, the clitter-clatter of metal on metal, a hissing noise, and a heavy, spoiled-meat scent. Blood mist drifted by.

She was hit hard in the back by a pair of outstretched hands. A man trampled over her. He was mad with fright, his eyes rolling, his teeth clenched so hard he had bitten his lip through. Blood poured unnoticed down his chin. He scrabbled over her, ripping her worn clothes in his haste to get away. She half rose, but a boot thumped into her back and she fell face down. Mud forced itself into her mouth. She tasted it on her tongue. Grit ground between her teeth.

The specialist was still screaming for people to clear his line. The thing was getting closer.

She rolled over, scraped mud from her eyes, desiring now – at the end – only to see the manner of death the Emperor had decreed for her. He had saved her something special.

The machine had an upper torso that vaguely resembled a human skeleton, though larger, sinisterly hunched like all the necron-kind. It was heavy, barrelling up the trench and tossing men aside. In place of two legs, it had three, and they were bladed and many-jointed, like those of an insect. A soldier crawled away from it, moaning, his legs broken by the machine’s charge. The alien saw him, and stamped. The pointed foot burst through his chest. The soldier choked up a welter of blood and died.

Shouts and running feet receded, leaving her alone. She heard a clicking somewhere behind her, and away from her position the whoops, shrieks and bangs of battle continued, but the trench walls deadened the clamour, making it distant, unrelated to her situation. The world shrank in, became intimate, and final.

The machine-monster stood over its victim. In its hands were two huge axes that glowed with a hideous green light… No, that wasn't right, she thought. The axes were its hands. They joined directly to its arms. It swung its head back and forth, eyes blazing, seeking prey. It found her.

She looked deep into those chilling eyes. They shone with a phantasmal glow at odds with its mechanical body, as if it were more than a machine, but less than a man. Something neither alive nor dead, trapped on the boundary between the two, and driven insane because of it.

It raised its blades.

Shanni closed her eyes, and mouthed a last prayer.

A voice came from behind and above. 'Emperor curse you all, you metal bastards.'

Heat-shocked air roared. The change in temperature made it explode outwards with a clap of artificial thunder. She opened her eyes.

A shimmering track showed the path of the fusion beam. Where it connected with the necron, metal ran white hot. She scrambled backwards, feet scraping furrows in the mud.

The necron tottered, but did not fall. The beam had hit it squarely where a man's heart would be. A human would have been reduced to a burning puddle by that blast.

The necron took a step forward.

'Down!' a vox-amplified woman's voice shouted.

The melta-gunner cast his gun aside and leaped at her, and pushed her back into the dirt.

Bolt-fire rattled behind them. The missiles slammed into the softened torso of the necron, and blew. It jerked madly, its head drooping, the light on its axes dimming and going out, leaving them as featureless, matt-black metal.

Three Sisters of Battle advanced, caked in mud and blood.

'Did you not hear the fallback order?' one of them demanded. 'All forces to fall back to the command bunker.'

‘We heard all right, Sister,’ said the trooper. He got up, hauled Shanni to her feet. ‘What were we supposed to do, fly?’

Shanni was appalled at the man’s lack of respect, but she owed him her life, and found herself unable to speak.

The Sister didn’t like it either. ‘Watch your tongue.’ She looked Shanni over. ‘You’re one of the pilgrims? Amazing you’ve lasted this long.’

‘Hush now, Sister,’ said the third. She wore markings on her armour that marked her out as a Sister Superior. ‘Or you shall be doing penance for a month.’

The gruff Sister grunted and turned away.

‘There’s something familiar about this one. What’s your name?’

‘Shanni, Sister. Shanni Saintsgift.’

‘Of Gathalamor?’

‘Once,’ Shanni said.

‘By His signs the Emperor shows He is with us after all,’ said the Sister Superior. ‘You’re coming with me. You…’ She pointed at the soldier. ‘Retrieve your weapon, then to the upper ramparts. That was a good shot.’

An unearthly machine howl cut through the murk of the battle.

‘They’re still coming,’ said the Sister Superior. ‘Let’s move.’

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Chapter Forty-Two

CAWL'S SOLUTION

GUILLIMAN'S MESSAGE

PRIMUS UNLEASHED

'Creator, creator…' Primus' words came out slurred. There was dampness on his chin. He was dimly aware of saliva pooling in the breathing mask again.

'Almost there, my boy! Almost there! Hold on now!'

Despite the gunfire roaring in every corner of the chamber, the complexity of what he was trying to achieve, the screams of Space Marines and cyborgs being consumed alive by living energy fields, Cawl sounded rather cheerful – almost chipper, to borrow one of his infuriating words. Often they were so archaic Primus suspected half the time he just made them up.

Primus tracked the constructs pouring into the control room with his bolt pistol. He was so weak he felt he would drop the weapon every time it fired.

He dragged himself up. A necron guardian construct phased through the wall, talons flashing, making for the archmagos. Primus groggily lumbered at it. Emperor alone knew what he would do if he caught it. He couldn't feel his hands. At that moment he would give anything to be strong again.

'Cawl!' he tried to shout. It came out as a wheeze. 'Cawl!'

Panic rose in him. As much as he resented Cawl, his role was to protect the archmagos, and pride demanded he do it well. He often wondered why he served this monster, who breezed through history with the abandon of a carelessly curious child, breaking things just because he could.

‘Cawl. Creator. Father.’ His words died in his throat. He collapsed to his knees. His maker was going to die. He had failed.

A solar anatomiser poked its broad snout from under Cawl’s robes, turned around, flicker-pulsed in time with the canoptek machine’s phase frequency, locked on, and fired, blasting it from the air with an efficiency that Primus found chilling. Cawl did not seem to notice, but worked on. There was a strange noise coming from him. In his stupor, Primus realised the archmagos was singing.

Cawl raised his hands and plunged them down onto the globular control mechanisms mounted upon the console.

An enormous weight suddenly lifted from Primus’ mind.

‘That should do!’ Cawl crowed. ‘That should do very nicely indeed!’

He glanced over his shoulder.

‘Are you feeling better now, Primus? The stilling mechanisms are offline. I’ve flooded the entire nexus with dataphages, and if I’m not mistaken – when am I ever mistaken? – the effect is spreading, and shall not be restored for some time.’

Unsurely, Primus nodded.

‘Then kindly unleash your gifts, my lad, and do something about that lot first, would you?’ He waved a mechadendrite behind him at the ribbons of scarabs flowing around the room, and the larger things, nightmare mechanical arthropods all, coming to steal their lives. ‘I’ve three jobs here, and have barely accomplished the first!’

Primus pushed himself up off the wall. His pain was back. It throbbed in his bones, along the lines of old surgical wounds, in his mangled soul.

It was a comfort. With pain came power.

‘When you’ve done with them, Messinius and Hiax could do with a hand. I’ve gained access to the necron sensorium network, and they’re not far. I’ll send you the–’

‘In a moment, my creator.’

Warpfire was already burning in Primus’ eyes as he turned to the centre of the spherical chamber. He holstered his chainsword and his pistol. It was

time for more powerful weapons.

Smiling gravely, Primus reached his mind deep into the opening warp. Finding it yet calm and pure in the wake of the stilling, he drew deep upon it, and unleashed its power freely.

Khestrin lifted his gaze from the displays. All around him, people were doing the same. Even Guilliman was looking around himself, blinking in the manner of a man who has awakened in a room he does not recognise.

'The stilling,' the primarch said. 'It diminishes further.'

'My lord… Cawl…' said Khestrin with a growing sense of wonder.

Despite the danger they were in, small, excited conversations broke out all through the lower strategium and beyond. They were talking on the command deck. People were moving faster, smiling even, shaking off a fatigue that went beyond tiredness.

'Cawl has succeeded,' said Guilliman. 'Send orders to the astropathicum to dispatch messages to the reserve battle groups. The advance begins now.'

Runners moved to do his bidding. Beyond the furthest edge of the Pariah Nexus, crusade battle groups were poised to push deeper into the zone, to continue Guilliman's plans to collapse the nexus.

'Matters are proceeding to plan,' said Guilliman.

'Until their main fleet engages.'

'Which is now,' said Guilliman. He pointed with one of the Hand of Dominion's enormous fingers. On the battlesphere cartolith, the main body of the necron fleet was moving.

'You should leave,' said Khestrin.

'He is right,' said Colquan. 'You have achieved your goal. You have taken enough risks, my lord.'

Khestrin was impressed by the way that Colquan always managed to make 'my lord' sound like an insult. He smoothed his oiled hair back again.

'For once, we are in agreement. You can take a fast ship, be away to Battle Group Gammaris and out of the system before they catch us.'

'No. I remain here,' said Guilliman.

'My lord?' said Khestrin. He could barely contain his incredulity.

'If I leave now,' said Guilliman, 'the whole fleet is doomed.' He gestured towards the screens around Khestrin, where the dispositions of the Imperial and necron fleets were clearly laid out.

‘They have deployed to take this vessel, and me with it,’ said Guilliman. ‘If I depart now, they will destroy every vessel they can. It is a military blow we will never recover from.’

Colquan turned and looked at him with disbelief.

‘My lord, I must protest! Losing you is the blow we will never recover from,’ said Khestrin.

‘I am one man,’ said Guilliman. ‘There are tens of millions here, do you mean to tell me I am worth more than every one of them? We will wait until the ship is attacked. Their attention will be on me. When our fleets are in retreat, then I shall take the *Aquila Resplendum* and leave. It is fast. It is heavily armoured. They will not take me.’

‘You’re a fool,’ said Colquan.

Khestrin stared at the Custodian. It was a struggle to keep his mouth from flapping open at the Custodian’s disrespect. Guilliman remained calm, and took a step towards Colquan, forcing him to take a step back.

‘Maybe I am too sentimental, and care for the wellbeing of the men who serve me,’ he said. ‘Or perhaps I see the value in the hundreds of vessels we will lose if I run, and understand the blow to morale that will cause, and the rebellions it will encourage, if the last protector of mankind flees like a coward.’

Colquan stood his ground. ‘It would have been better if you had never come back,’ said the tribune in a hard whisper.

‘But I am here. You might prefer a more brutal man, Colquan, a warmaster, perhaps. I am not that man.’

‘You have risked us all, using yourself, as bait.’

‘I am the bait which can extricate itself from the trap,’ said Guilliman. ‘Khestrin, begin orders to evacuate the *Dawn of Fire*. The staff of the Council Exterra, the remaining historitors. Any remaining non-essential personnel will depart now by fast vessel to meet with Group Gammaris.’

‘Of course, my lord.’

‘Reduce crewing to skeleton level. Choose volunteers to stay behind first before pressing the remainder.’

‘You will be touring the sumps and offering freedom to the ratings next,’ Colquan said angrily. ‘This is ridiculous.’

‘I would offer the choice to the ratings if I could,’ Guilliman said firmly. ‘I’ll leave a rearguard of Adeptus Astartes here.’

‘Do you wish me to speak with them, my lord?’ Khestrin asked.

‘I shall do that,’ said Guilliman. ‘They should hear it from me.’

Khestrin nodded.

‘Khestrin.’

The fleetmaster was already giving orders. He turned back to Guilliman. ‘My lord?’

‘You will be leaving the ship with the others,’ the primarch said.

‘My lord!’

‘That is an order, my friend. This decoy duty is no onerous task, and I will need your talents in the wars to come.’

‘But who will remain in command? Fleet activities will still need to be coordinated during the retreat.’

‘They will.’ Guilliman stepped to the side, revealing Rear Admiral Dho Gan Mey standing quietly there, his hands clasped behind his back, his eyes pointing at the floor. ‘I leave the fleet under experienced stewardship.’

‘I thought you would be leaving with the rest of the council?’ Khestrin said.

Mey looked up and gave a somewhat bashful smile. ‘I could, but I couldn’t resist one last fight,’ he said.

Messinius could not recall how he had been wounded. He was fighting. There was a green flash, and he had fallen. His helmet was broken. He could not see out of his right eye. Blood gathered in the bottom of what was left of his breathing mask. But that was minor, considering the hole in his breastplate. He stared at it, feeling nothing, deep in shock. His Emperor’s gifts would have prevented shock in all but the gravest of circumstances, and that told him all he needed to know about how serious the wound was.

His ceramite was laid open in a circle. The edges were rough, the crystals in the alloy exposed. Pulsing redness lay beneath, fading into the darkness of his own chest. He had lost his primary heart, he distantly supposed. Blood seeped from the wound, his superior physiology having stemmed the flow, mingling with foam sealants leaking from the capsules built into the ceramite. Like him, his armour was badly wounded. The sealant would stop a small air leak, it couldn’t hope to fill a hole that size. His armour was inert. The blast had coursed through its systems, he remembered that,

shocking them into silence. But even if it were still functional, he doubted he could stand.

A baseline human would have died instantly from this. Were it not for the hyper-coagulative nature of his modified vitae, he would have exsanguinated instantly. As it was, he was hanging on. He supposed he might survive, given proper attention. He would not receive it. His Apothecary was dead. This was the end.

His men were dying around him. Thothven lay prone, still firing, using the body of one of the fallen as cover. Somehow Hiax lived. He was an accomplished fighter, Messinius thought, in a slow, dreamy way, as for a few seconds he watched the magos battling one of the necrons' abominable constructs, matching its preternatural speed with dazzling reflexes, two short powerblades finding their way into its innards.

This was it then. A hundred years of service. He had failed. Blood welled from his mouth with every breath. Blood ran from his eye. Each labouring pump of his secondary heart was a knife in his chest.

He tried to remain alert, but he could not. His left eye closed.

He came to with a start. Something had changed. There was a charge on the air, a prickle of power that was almost, but not quite, electric.

Witchery.

As he thought the word a strike of dazzling warp lightning branched through the chamber, leaping from construct to construct. They fell dead instantly, green lights out, their self-repair mechanisms failing to activate. Their limbs curled in, leaving them to appear for all the world like the tiny, organic creatures that burrowed and fed in the soils of untold worlds.

Primus was there. Messinius lifted his head a little. The effort made his mind explode with needled spots of light, but he had to see. Cawl's giant had come, and he was terrible and glorious.

Warp light bathed him from head to foot. His weapons were sheathed, he fought with his mind alone. His eyes seemed to have vanished, to have been consumed by the light pouring out of them – dazzling light, blinding light.

Primus raised his palms. From them came beams of pure, unadulterated psychic power. They caught a tottering thing on legs, and it vanished with a clap of thunder.

Messinius' remaining eye closed once again. He forced it open and saw Primus covered by scarabs from head to toe, watched him crouch, then fling

his arms apart, casting out a searing dome of power that blasted the constructs to pieces. Bits of alien metal rained down.

Then blackness embraced him finally. He felt himself lifted, and carried. Under his bodyglove, his skin was growing sticky with the beginnings of his hibernation coating.

That was the last he knew.

Guns banged incessantly from the top of the bunker. The shrieks of circling necron craft drilled into their ears, prodding constantly at their animal need to run. But they did not run. Novitiates stood, head bowed, around the command centre, chanting praises to He of Terra. Canoness Emmanuelle stared at the woman kneeling before her and smiled, despite the weariness gripping her, despite the certainty that soon her story would be over.

Shanni kept her head bowed. ‘You saved me back on Gathalamor, Holy Sister.’

‘If I recall, it was the Custodians of the Emperor Himself who saved you.’

‘You helped me. You made sure my wounds were healed, that my bones were properly set. I never got the chance to thank you properly.’ She looked up. ‘Until now.’

‘You have grown.’

‘I was young. I was lost. My faith was wavering. I saw the light of Him, and I saw His holy guardians and His holy daughters. I am blessed.’

‘It is exceptional.’

‘I wished to serve. There is nothing exceptional in that. I did what I could. I am blessed.’

‘I meant your survival. That was exceptional. Members of battle cults do not live long, ordinarily.’

‘I have seen many die,’ Shanni agreed. ‘I was spared.’

‘They called you a saint.’

‘I am no saint. I have had all the blessing the Emperor was willing to give, and it was more than I had any right to expect. I denied it. You know I did.’

An understanding passed between them, there, in the bunker, near the end. Emmanuelle found this simple woman’s faith an unexpected source of comfort.

‘Get up,’ Emmanuelle said, and extended her hand. Shanni took it. ‘Give her water,’ she commanded one of her Celestians. There were only three of

them left, all battle worn.

Shanni was offered a canteen and took it.

‘By the Emperor’s grace, slake your thirst,’ the Celestian said.

Shanni drank, slowly at first, then gulped fast as her body remembered its need. She handed the canteen back. She looked Emmanuelle in the eye.

‘This is the end, isn’t it?’

Emmanuelle looked around the bunker. There were grim faces in every corner. She was almost glad of the coming death. Her life had been long and hard. She had earned her place at the Emperor’s side.

‘Yes.’

‘I would have liked to have been a Daughter of the Emperor, like you,’ Shanni said.

‘You were too old when you came to us,’ Emmanuelle lied. It had been she who had vetoed Shanni’s recruitment. She did not like to peddle falsehoods, but sometimes a lie was more of a mercy than the truth.

Shanni nodded meekly. There were muffled gunshots and the sounds of shouting coming through the armoured door. It was four inches thick, and bedded deeply into the wall. The enemy were close.

‘You have fought well. You are here. You have kept the Emperor’s light in your soul and let it bathe all who had the good fortune to meet you. Had the Emperor arranged it otherwise, I would have been proud to call you Sister, so I call you Sister now.’ She raised her power sword to her face, hilt up, and kissed the place where the blade emerged from the quillons. She meant what she said. Emmanuelle knew she was not perfect. She had made mistakes.

Green light snapped and fizzled around the edges of the door. The Sisters shifted, power armour purring. Disruption fields activated on long-bladed swords with decisive snaps.

A pile of discarded weaponry in the corner of the room caught Emmanuelle’s eye.

‘Marian, give her the armaments of a Sister of the Argent Shroud. You shall die as one of us.’

Marian handed Shanni a bolt pistol and a power mace. A good choice, thought Emmanuelle. Easier to wield. She almost laughed at the mundanity of the thought. She stifled it. She wished to die with dignity.

‘Now we will pray,’ she said. She raised her eyes heavenward. ‘Oh Emperor,’ she said. ‘Guard us now in our final moments.’

The others joined her, their voices low and dolorous.

‘Oh Emperor. Guide our hands so that in our deaths we might slay your foes, until the last breath leaves our bodies, and the cold stills our hearts.’

Faltering voices became firm. The light around the door grew brighter, moved in, spots appearing in the middle, joining together.

‘Oh Emperor, welcome us into your embrace,’ Emmanuelle said, and levelled her gun at the door. The metal was smoking. ‘Oh Emperor, take us to your side, so we may join your hosts of spirits ready for the wars to come. Oh Emperor! Now and for always, we are yours. We are of Terra, fearless and bold, the rightful masters of all! Imperator! Imperator! Imperator!’

The door vanished, the last, thinned shell of it collapsing in a shower of ash. Behind, a heavy necron construct hulked, its double-barrelled weapon glowing with deadly energies that matched its ruthless eyes.

‘Ave Imperator! For He shall rule the galaxy forever!’ the doomed congregation shouted, and opened fire, and by a wash of flensing, alien energies were carried into the Emperor’s light together.

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Chapter Forty-Three

AN OLD ADMIRAL

TRAINWRECK

VOIDS DOWN

‘They’re coming in,’ Gan Mey said.

The necrons arrowed towards Battle Group Alpharis, virtually ignoring the other groups as they fled for the Mandeville point and the safety of the warp.

‘The primarch has left the command deck,’ one of his staff reported quietly.

Finally, Mey thought.

‘Range?’ he said.

‘Twenty-five thousand miles and closing.’

‘Are the evacuation transports safe?’

‘They are approaching Battle Group Gammaris. They should be picked up soon and into the warp before the necrons can catch them.’

‘Then the primarch’s plan is working,’ said Gan Mey. It was good to be back in command after so long, to feel the thrum of the engines beneath the soles of his boots and know that they were his to command. He smiled, then checked it. Best not appear too gleeful, he thought. He had chosen to be there. He had a long career behind him, and a short span of years ahead.

Although most of the crew remaining were old like himself, many of them were not. They were going to die young. They didn't have this little nostalgia trip to distract them. He must be mindful of that.

'We shall praise the Emperor and thank Him for His mercy towards His last loyal son. While he lives, humanity lives,' he declaimed, so all in the lower strategium could hear.

He swung about on his heel, and began to pace.

'Alas, the Emperor is not here right now, is He?' He asked this question directly of one of Khestrin's staff.

'No, my lord.'

'Do you see Him sitting down there, on the command deck, in His Golden Throne, ready to do our work for us?'

His minor blasphemy drew a few awkward gasps.

'No, sir!'

'Indeed not. I am sure He watches, and works His marvellous will to ensure our success, but it is our task to ensure the primarch lives, not the Emperor's, ours! We will take this task to ourselves, and we shall–'

'My lord, I am sorry to interrupt, but we are picking up widecast signals from the enemy fleet.' The lieutenant who had spoken bent over his scope. 'Vox-silence denial,' he said.

Mey stopped his speech immediately. A pity. He was enjoying that.

'Stopper the ears of the fleet,' said Mey. 'There will be subjugation code in whatever they are putting out. If the others can't hear us, best not sup the poison of the enemy willingly, eh?'

The man squinted, and pressed his eyes to the rubber collar around the scope's tiny screen.

'It's too late, my lord. I have reports of active enemy dataphages across multiple systems.'

Mey sighed. He hated fighting advanced species. It was much more fun exchanging body blows with the likes of the orks or the kroot; they enjoyed a good scrap, and were honest about it.

'Lock them down. Get the transmechanics up here. Go to hardline protocol and assemble the messenger corps. Looks like we'll have to do this the old-fashioned way.' He grinned, showing even teeth gone grey with age 'The really old-fashioned way.'

There was a change to the world. Something hidden, but tangible, ceased.

The constructs stopped dead. Contra-grav fields gave out gently, lowering the things they supported to the floor. Machines in mid-stride seized and toppled.

The fires died around Primus' hands.

When the last echo of falling metal faded into nothing, a silence engulfed the necron world as profound as that of the airless void. It was so quiet, Primus could hear the twinned heartbeats of the surviving Space Marines thudding beneath their ceramite. He heard the shush-roar of his own elevated pulse rate, the whine of Hiax's augmetic systems.

'What happened?' Thothven spoke. That was his name, Primus recalled. The captain.

'Cawl has happened,' said Primus.

They were a sorry band. Seven left, all battered from the fight. Two men carried Messinius between them. Primus would have left him behind had it been down to him to decide. He did not think the lord lieutenant would live.

'Quickly now!' Magos Hiax said. That was a miracle, right there. The tech-priest should have been dead. 'This effect may not persist.'

Primus agreed. 'The archmagos is this way.'

The necron flagship was closing. Purple fire crawled past the oculus of the *Dawn of Fire*'s command deck as it spat its alien hatred upon them.

'Scutum control indicates we're losing the voids!'

Mey could see that. More, he could feel it, the teeth-itching shiver from the warp as void shields flexed under stress.

'Then we shall rely on armour and the Emperor's grace.'

'Final void envelope at ten per cent, five per cent…' The officer manning the desk where reports were sent up from the scutum section below looked up from her display, and then down and out through the armaglass oculus.

'Final void down.'

The ship shook as heavy energy beams tore into its armour. Mey was not too concerned, not yet, the *Dawn of Fire* was well blessed with plating.

'Rear admiral, incoming barrage. Some kind of hard munition.'

Mey looked over the instruments. Luckily for him, things didn't change in the Imperium, and the equipment was the same he had used on active service fifty years before. The screens were blurring with enemy

interference, and would soon be unreadable. He looked out of the oculus. For once, human sight was more reliable. Showers of metal splinters glittered like chaff between the ships. Really, these things should have been dealt with by the command deck crew. An officer like him should be concentrating on fleet coordination, if he were really in command and not simply steadying the tiller while the primarch escaped.

'Type unknown,' an officer said.

'Limpet bombs, or simple explosive shells,' another offered.

'Augury stations are scanning for contents. Content unknown. They are too small to carry troops.'

According to his training, Mey would have agreed. They were too small for boarding skiffs – flat-faced, boxy things with a single engine, enough for maybe three of the accursed robots apiece.

His experience said otherwise. It never paid to underestimate the deviltry of xenos.

His sense of affable pleasure at being in command vanished.

'Step up the efforts of the defence turrets,' he said. He leaned on the barrier around Khestrin's station, knuckles pressed onto polished wood. 'And stand ready to repel boarders.'

Guilliman's escort moved steadily down a sloping corridor that cut under the superstructure from the command deck, the most direct route to the crew trains that ferried people down the length of the ship.

Eight Victrix Guard formed a protective box around Guilliman. Sicarius went in front of him, Colquan and three other Adeptus Custodes right ahead. Four units of ten Space Marines, Greyshields of Dorn's, Ferrus Manus' and Guilliman's lines flanked them.

Lumens flickered. The noise of the vessel's systems faltered.

'We are under informational attack,' said Sicarius.

'You have fought these creatures before, I hear,' said Colquan.

'At Damnos, some years ago, when we thought they were a local threat.' The idea seemed laughable. 'They are technologically advanced, fearless, heavily armoured. They are formidable on the field, and their armoury encompasses tech-war capabilities that are fearsome. If they get into the ship's systems and cripple the engines, we will fail to catch Betaris, and we shall never be able to get away from their fighters,' said Sicarius.

‘The *Aquila Resplendum* is one of the finest ships in all the Imperial fleet,’ said Colquan. ‘It is fast, well shielded, and well armoured. It will bear the primarch away.’

Sicarius looked up at the Custodian. Colquan glanced his way. Even through the tribune’s shining auramite helm, Sicarius experienced his hostility.

‘I repeat his words. That is what the primarch said, Space Marine, so we must believe him,’ Colquan said coldly.

There was a moment’s silence.

‘You do not like my kind,’ said Sicarius. ‘You see in us the ruin of Terra.’

Colquan’s lack of response spoke volumes. Sicarius went on.

‘I agree with you – this plan is a risk. I did not like it from the start. Why did you not convince him to do otherwise?’

Colquan grunted, half laughing. ‘Have you ever tried to convince him to do anything?’

‘Then could you not at least have thought of a better way to remove the regent from danger? We should take him off in something less obvious.’

‘There is no time for subterfuge,’ Colquan said. ‘That time has gone, do you understand? Anything that leaves this ship will be destroyed. He must therefore leave on the vessel that gives him the highest chance of survival.’

‘The protection of the primarch is my only concern. He is the great hope of Terra. He must not die.’

‘Then perhaps you can impress that upon him, the next time we are confronted with a situation like this,’ said Colquan. ‘Emperor knows, he will not listen to me.’

They reached the fourteenth deckway. They’d chosen that rather than the primary spinal thoroughfare for its deepness within the ship. More layers of armour and deck lay between the primarch and the void down there, but it didn’t seem to matter.

The train had crashed, gone straight into the buffers on the siding that allowed others to pass it when it was stopped. It had hit hard, and the main rail was bent. Cars were scattered like discarded ammo boxes for a hundred yards. All the lumens were out away from the station. Dead and dying mortals lay around the wreck, so many their blood had gathered into a wide lake that even now crept slowly outward.

When they saw the primarch, they began to wail.

‘Help us, help us! Please! Blessed primarch! Save us!’

Guilliman ignored them, casting about for one of the less injured, and finding a likely prospect – a woman, sitting by the corpse of a man.

‘What happened here?’ the primarch asked.

The woman looked up at him, and recoiled, unable to believe what she was seeing.

‘Blessed primarch! Oh! I am sorry. Forgive, forgive!’ She threw herself into the blood covering the deck plates.

‘Do not be afraid. Tell me what happened.’

‘The train. It didn’t stop.’

‘It is the enemy,’ said Sicarius. ‘They suborn our machine spirits. This is a standard tactic of theirs, to turn our technology against us.’

‘You.’ Guilliman pointed to two of the Space Marines. ‘See what you can do for these people.’

‘They will be missed in battle,’ Colquan said. ‘These mortals are doomed anyway.’

‘Do not begrudge me this small act of mercy, Custodian,’ Guilliman said.

There was a shudder. Part of the chorus of rumbles and hums that made up the ship’s voice died. Something changed at a more fundamental level. It felt like a release from spiritual peril, though it in fact heralded physical harm. They all recognised it.

‘The voids are down,’ Sicarius said.

Guilliman looked down the corridor. ‘It is seven decks and half a mile to the Palatine Hangar,’ he said. ‘Run. Now.’

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Chapter Forty-Four

COLQUAN'S IRE

GUILLIMAN BESET

A WAY OUT

Halfway to the Palatine Hangar, the *Dawn of Fire* entered its death throes. The ship yawed enough to upset Colquan's sense of balance. He felt the movement as a sudden, wrenching change of inertia through the grav-plating. Some energies were too violent to mask. Air raced past them, eager for freedom in the void, sucking smoke into twists of black so regular they appeared designed. Fire licked out from behind wall panels, running down ancient cables to set blazes far from their points of origin.

Custodian Taquis skidded to a halt where steam burst from the corridor wall.

'Tribune! Xenos inbound.'

A wall glowed with that thick green light that had become so tiresomely familiar, and collapsed inward, leaving a perfect square three yards by three. There was a fleeting impression of a shallow, boxy machine burrowed into the hull, then it was obscured by a teleportation portal of some kind as two sliding oblongs approached each other from the top and bottom of the boarding device. As soon as they touched, they made a sheet

of liquid emerald, and a rank of necrons stepped out, shoulder to shoulder, already firing before they had fully bridged the stars.

Taquis bore the brunt of the opening salvo. The shots were accurate, hitting his chestplate and helm. Crackling particles of matter spat from his armour. He grunted, pushed into the streams, and swung his sentinel blade blindly forward. The aliens fell down, their chests exploded. There were more behind.

‘Get clear, Taquis,’ Colquan commanded. ‘Get to the ship. Secure the way!’

Taquis limped past, his hand clutched to his ruined breastplate. Colquan advanced with weapon levelled, blasting away with his guardian spear’s in-built bolter.

‘Tribune! Three more boarding portals inbound!’

Colquan cursed loudly. He barged a necron back through the portal, ignoring the iron hands reaching for him, and cut quickly across the top of the pod. The light cut out abruptly, slicing the necrons crossing over to pieces. Severed machine parts bounced across the deck.

There were more. He turned to find three portals open, and necrons flooding aboard. He roared his anger, and threw himself at them.

‘Destroy the craft!’ he commanded. ‘Stop them coming through!’

Colquan’s guardian spear sheared through the torsos of alien machines. The blade was sharp, but it was the thin sheen of blue surrounding the cutting edge which did the damage. Atomic bonds burst under contact with the disruptor field, and the weapon slid through the alien metal as if it were water.

A necron fell in half. Colquan kicked it aside, already pivoting, already whirling his spear around, the blade hurtling for its next victim.

Boarding craft continued to bore through the hull, some kind of phase generators, he suspected, short-range teleporters that shunted the matter aside temporarily. Necron technology evidenced a grasp of dimensional manipulation that concerned him. Others saw Colquan as a brooding, brutish man, and he did little to persuade them otherwise. Somebody in the Ten Thousand had to be feared. It was not enough that baseline humans venerated the Emperor’s guardians, or even feared them instinctively. They had to fear them for what they could do as well as what they represented.

Colquan was happy to fill that role. The Adeptus Custodes were well aware that fear was the glue of the Imperium.

Beneath this assumed character, he was a learned man, as much of a scholar as his wisest brothers. A long list of alien species humanity had encountered and bested during its interstellar history, many sent into the black finality of extinction, ran through his mind. There were other technologically powerful beings out there, beings that combined the sciences of the warp and materium, or employed thinking machines, or who could bend time to their will. But in the main these creatures lacked humanity's teeming numbers. The necrons were numerous, and they were everywhere. That was a worrisome combination.

He thought these things as he slew the alien androids. He noted how they moved, how they fought, how they functioned. Their foot soldiers were mindless automata, but it was obvious calculating minds were behind them. This attack was not a reflexive act of aggression. Guilliman had underestimated them. The primarch had laid a trap and then obligingly stepped into it himself.

Guilliman's earnestness and affected compassion hid a deep arrogance. He believed himself better than them all. What other man would make such theatre of taking on the burden of rulership? He no longer believed that Guilliman actively coveted the Throne, but if anything the risk of him seizing it had grown, if only because he would eventually come to see it as the right course of action.

He ducked under the guardian blade of Lagus, rolled around his back, the two of them working seamlessly together to cut down a trio of the enemy. A gateway punched through the hull two spear's lengths away. The necrons were packed tight. Too tight to fire their guns as they emerged. This would be done soon.

He and Lagus parted, their blades moving to their own rhythms, like dancers who, having mirrored each other's steps for a while, break off to pursue new partners.

Colquan's spearhead dipped and spun, aimed precisely at vulnerable points, dropping the machines with maximum efficiency. They tumbled down, heads separated from necks, legs cut out from under bodies. He took a blow from a heavy bayonet, turned it with the shaft of his halberd, pivoted, kicked the bearer backwards and shot it at point-blank range in the

chest. The bolts barely penetrated the hyper-dense alloy of its armour. The last rounds finally blew inside the creature's glowing ribcage. Luminous liquids spattered the floor, and the necron dropped with a heavy crash.

He saw with disgust that the haft of his halberd was scratched. Auramite was exceedingly difficult to damage, and the alien's blade had not even been powered.

Then he was moving again, his Custodians working around him. Each of them alone was a portrait of martial excellence; together they were more than the sum of their efforts. Their weapons weaved around each other, never once touching, no stroke misplaced. Gold blurred with silver. Green energy beams flashed. Necrons died by the score. A portal imploded with a loud crackle. A second followed. Bolt-rounds were speeding down the corridor in buzzing swarms as the Space Marines caught up. He had no time to look back to see if the primarch was still with them. Colquan cursed Guilliman's affection for his sons. The primarch should be there, near the front, where the Custodians could shield him, not lingering at the rear. He thought it a joke that Space Marines were needed to guard something that powerful. They were not protecting him, Guilliman was protecting them.

There was no denying, however, that the Adeptus Astartes made his job a little easier. Each unliving machine took several bolt hits to die, but they did die, and Colquan found himself with more room to move.

The last portal was shattered by a fusillade from the Custodians.

'Section clear!' Lagus reported. The corridor was full of broken necrons. The boarding portals spat ugly gobs of power from ruptured conduits.

'More will arrive soon,' said Guilliman. He surveyed the shattered machines. The Hand of Dominion hummed aggressively. The Emperor's Sword burned. He had been fighting himself. 'These will rise again.'

'Incoming!' Lagus said.

Perfect rectangles of hull disintegrated, and more portals opened.

'Form up,' the primarch commanded. His Victrix Guard came up to flank him. Other Space Marines sought good firing positions. 'We'll fight our way forward in a phalanx,' Guilliman said, and Colquan could not help but think that the XIII primarch was enjoying himself.

Step, block, parry, counter. Sicarius recited the age-old pattern in his head. Step, block, parry, counter. It was easy to fall into the rhythm of it. The

necrons did not move like living beings – hardly a surprise, he thought. But they didn't move like machines, either. They moved like the dead. He had faced poxwalkers, corpses animated by sorcery, and living beings puppeted by vile alien minds. The necrons reminded him of those, of creatures trapped in horrifying dreams and acting them out, unaware they were sleeping. Unaware that they were dead.

Strange to think such things of machines. It was a long time since he had encountered them on Damnos, when they were just another minor xenos menace to be stamped flat. Even at the height of the battle, when he saw them by the thousand and was wounded at the hand of one of their higher forms, he could not have guessed how dangerous they would become.

Step, block, parry, counter. The ancient chop and advance of the gladius. There was no need to vary the pattern. The pattern was efficient. It was steady. The attack protocols of the drone machines were predictable. They lacked will of their own. There were hundreds of them in the corridor, periodically spilling in through their boxy boarding pods. All of them were the same.

Step. Block. Parry. Counter.

His latest opponent slid off the end of his blade. He raised a hand. The Adeptus Astartes with him spread out and took up firing positions. Necrons were advancing in eerie lockstep, far more synchronised than the most exhaustively drilled human force. They made no sound. A buzzing came off their workings. Occasional sparks cracked from damaged containment chambers.

Time to clear a little space.

The enemy raised their guns and opened fire. Columns of killing light sped by. An Unnumbered Son took a hit in the throat that ate through his armoured seal and into the flesh. He fell back, blood fountaining.

Bolt-fire and fusion beams slammed into the necron ranks. They were heavily armoured, as apt to get up again as they were to die, but they were not invincible.

The noise of bolts clashing on alien metal was impressive. They fell down uncomplainingly, blasted to pieces and partially slagged. Sicarius ordered the Victrix Guard forward. On their way they cut down at necrons already crawling back together, their weapons and armour flashing green with the ignition of xenos phase fields, dragging the androids back to their tombs.

Gauss-fire flared around storm shields. The corridor was full of the racket of war.

They were nearing their destination. Sicarius focused. If the enemy intended to increase their efforts against the primarch, they would do so now.

Sure enough, it was so.

There was a blur on the air, and a vortex of green energy that dissipated as quickly as it came, bringing onto the *Dawn of Fire* a necron lord and his entourage.

Sicarius assessed the threat quickly. Targeting reticles in his helm display bounced from necron to necron. These were the xenos elite, cunning and dangerous.

His armour's spirits appended the greatest threat level to their leader. A king among their kind, his armoured form was heavily decorated. He stood taller than his cohort of guards by a head. He wore a cloak of metal scales that moved with a will of its own, animated by the same heretekal unlife as their wearer. He carried a tall staff in his right hand, double-bladed, the edges crawling with viridian sparks. His left hand clutched a glass orb as big as Sicarius' head. In its black depths, vapours swirled.

The guardians of the lord were ten in number, five carrying tall shields that shone with protective power fields, and armed with short-hafted axes. The other five were hunchbacked giants, each one bearing a bladed staff whose ends crackled with energy.

'To the primarch!' Sicarius commanded. His orders were swallowed by the noise of the battle. His comms were overwhelmed by vox-blunts. Red lights blinked in the lower left of his view, telling him his armour's machine spirit was engaged in a battle of its own. The necrons were attacking on every material level, but in the psychic theatre, there was nothing. There was not even a sense of life from the beings, of the anger and hot-blooded aggression of living things fighting to survive. They were less than dead.

The guardians moved in front of the lord, locking their shields together. Space Marines slammed into the barrier. The staff-armed lychguard spread out either side of the short shield wall, so that they were blocking the corridor, wide though it was, trapping the primarch away from the Palatine Hangar. Colquan and his Custodians saw this, and turned back.

The necron lord raised his orb, and it blazed with an unholy light. Where it touched upon the fallen necrons on the decks, they jerked, and the repair protocols every one of the cursed things possessed went into overdrive. The shattered machines pulled themselves back together and staggered to their feet by the score, barring Colquan's way. There was a buzz in the aggressive static blaring in Sicarius' ears, the ghost of Colquan's ident signum on his display. What the tribune said, Sicarius could not hear.

'To the primarch! Break through! Get him off the ship!' Sicarius roared.

Sicarius smashed a necron down and stamped on it, took another in the neck with his power sword. They were moving more fluidly than before, with a greater variety to their attack patterns.

Sicarius' blade buzzed. The necrons were so durable, he needed to strike hard to put them down. They felt no pain. Only catastrophic damage would take them out of the fight, and even then they self-repaired, got up, and attacked again. He was in a nightmare of attack vectors, where foes thought vanquished re-engaged from unexpected quarters.

At the front of the press, Space Marines were dying, and they did not rise again. Bolt-rounds exploded ineffectually on the shields of the foe. The staff bearers whirled their blades about, forcing Space Marines back. Though lacking the protection of the shields, the necrons were largely impervious to bolt-fire. There were few specialised weapons on the Imperial side. They had their bolters. They had their blades. Sicarius feared these would not be enough, and his mind strayed back to the screams and the desperate shouts of his men lost in the warp.

Ceramite smashed into the line of shields. Blades slashed down from the other side. Space Marines fell. Two grabbed at a shield, the power field roaring around their fingers in jags of lightning as they yanked it down. The necron guard swung with its blade, cleaving into one of the Space Marines' helmets as if it were made of moulded plastek. The man fell, but not before his comrade had jammed his bolt rifle under the chin of the guard and pulled the trigger, filling the ancient machine's skull with explosions that flashed out of its eye sockets, replacing green light with yellow fire. The necron toppled down in a tangle of mechanical limbs.

Swift retaliation saw the Space Marine pay with his life for his efforts, his headless corpse joining that of his brother on the floor. In the back and forth trade of battle, two Adeptus Astartes for one necron was a poor exchange.

Sicarius finished his own foe, pivoting to take on the next. Necrons were still pouring aboard. He feared another direct teleportation strike. They were in danger of being overwhelmed. Metal claws reached for him, dragging at him. A lead-coloured blade swung his way. He could not parry. The edge clanged off his arm, peeling the colour from his ceramite. He elbowed the creature holding him in the face, cracking its vacant expression. It held on still, until a second blow put out the light in its eyes.

It was no good. The weight of the things pulling at him dragged him backwards. His vision was crowded by raking, unthinking metal fingers. His armour was being tugged away.

There was the sensation of something huge and powerful moving by at speed. A rush of fire, and the weight on Sicarius lifted away. Guilliman yanked one back and tossed it aside with the Hand of Dominion, the thing coming to pieces as it flew through the air.

Then he was away, stepping over Sicarius, the mass of his life-preserving armour crushing necrons flat as they struggled back up to their feet. He never stopped moving, the Hand of Dominion sweeping restlessly across the fray, spewing large-calibre bolts into the foe that struck with hammer-blow force, reducing necrons to scrap. The Sword of the Emperor roared fire, cleaving them down, and when they fell, they neither rose again nor phased away.

The alien lord took something from its belt, drew back its arm and threw. A shining box tumbled through the air. Guilliman saw it, batted it aside with the back of his hand. It fell among the battling Space Marines and necrons where it detonated with a subdued pop and a flash of purple light. When the explosion faded, if that was what it truly was, there was an area ten yards across clear of any being, necron or Imperial.

Guilliman let out a roar that stunned Sicarius, and launched himself at the shield wall. The lord raised his arm, and a dart of light sped from a device mounted on his wrist. Guilliman leaned aside with incredible speed, and the dart hissed past his face. It was no brighter than a las-beam and shorter-lived, but it hit with devastating force, drilling a hole into the hull that went all the way out to the void. Air squealed out through the tiny hole. Guilliman hit the shield wall. His impact knocked the lychguard back, though they did not fall. Their blows struck against the energy field around the Armour of Fate. Guilliman punched into a shield, the Hand of Dominion

folding it around his fist like crumpled foil and carrying on into the lychguard, who broke upon a ball of lightning into a hundred pieces.

Sicarius was following now. He went not to the primarch but to the other Space Marines. He engaged a lychguard, preventing it from eviscerating one of the Unnumbered Sons. The primarch was set upon by all the guardians of the lord, who abandoned their positions, exposing their backs to the Space Marines to protect their leader from the regent's wrath.

Guilliman battled them all, all but the one who Sicarius met blades with, and his duel with the lychguard was a pale imitation of the fight Guilliman was engaged in. The last loyal son swung the Emperor's Sword as if it were a switch, parrying the blows raining in at him, so that few touched him. The Hand of Dominion lashed out, striking a necron in the face, obliterating the top half of its body.

From behind, Colquan's shouts could finally be heard.

'To the hangar, lord regent! To the hangar!'

Machines broke before him, always re-forming and attacking again.

Throughout all this, the necron lord watched, as if appraising a gladiator in a fighting pit before committing to purchase.

Sicarius was a warrior. He could see the lord was watching the primarch to understand how he fought. He did not like that. The less these xenos knew, the better.

He had his own opponent to deal with. It wielded its staff with remarkable skill, always barely half a second away from penetrating Sicarius' guard. Three jabs at his lower body were turned aside in artificial storms of disruption lightning. The energies burned in opposing twists of power, earthing themselves in the legs of the necron and the Space Marine. The guard jabbed high. Sicarius stopped the blade, turned his wrist, and ran his own sword down the haft of the staff, intending to take off the android's hands at the wrists, but this was an ancient warrior, tutored in war millions of years before Sicarius' birth, and it saw the move. It swept the staff round, throwing off Sicarius' blade, and replied with a solid lunge at the captain. The tip of its staff slammed into the aquila on his chest. The ceramite held, but the impact shocked his organs, and Sicarius tasted blood. The construct drew its blade back to strike down. Sicarius was quicker, feinting to disrupt its attack, then stamping forward and down into its knee, bending the joint

sideways and destroying it. The machine stumbled, and bolt-fire from the Unnumbered Sons cut it apart before Sicarius could finish it.

A dozen feet away, Guilliman continued to fight. Flaming sword met powered alien blades. Sparks and fire burst around them, wreathing them in explosions. Another lychguard fell, then another. Guilliman moved on the lord, but was forced to turn away from it when the remaining bodyguards attacked.

He was distracted only a moment, but the lord took his chance, moving suddenly from a pose of concentration to activity. His own weapon swept round towards the back of the primarch.

Guilliman pivoted, swayed aside from a humming staff head, reached out with the Hand of Dominion, and caught the necron lord's staff flat against its palm.

The power fist's energy shield boomed as the gauntlet closed, twisted, snapping the staff in two. The sword in the primarch's other hand took the heads from two of the last lychguard. He let the swing carry on, the six-foot blade whooshing around, trailing its cloak of fire. The lord stepped back. The sword hurtled at it, certain to hit.

There was a burst of green light, and the lord displaced itself a few feet, reappearing behind the primarch. Once more the primarch's incomparable reflexes made themselves known. He adjusted immediately, stepping round, flinging out the Hand of Dominion, and knocking the alien back. His movement continued into a thrust of the Emperor's Sword the alien did not see coming and the tip stabbed into and through its chest, bursting from its back in a spatter of melting metal. It fell down with a cry that sounded more frustrated than pained.

Guilliman wrenched the Emperor's Sword out of the necron lord. Thick fluid bubbled from the rent in the breastplate, so much like a wound cut into living tissue. Squirms of metal reached glittering tendrils across the gap to knit the wound together. They did not meet, but shrivelled back like flesh undergoing rapid necrosis. The lord let out a pained howl, and Sicarius wondered, not for the first time, if these metal things had souls. The Emperor's Sword annihilated the spirit, it was believed. Would His power burn their intellects from existence also?

So he hoped. Oh, by the Emperor, so he hoped.

Guilliman put his foot on the lord’s dropped orb, and pressed down, crushing it to powder.

‘Primarch! Now!’ Colquan yelled.

For the briefest moment, they were safe. The corridor leading to the Palatine Hangar was clear of all but a few necrons. Sicarius saw the *Aquila Resplendum* between Colquan and his warriors. A hundred yards away, the wounded Taquis limped towards it. A group of Space Marines waited in the hangar on guard.

Security was an illusion that lasted only long enough for Sicarius to take in the scene.

A blade of green light cut neatly through the corridor, precisely, delicately, a scalpel moved by surgeon. The deck between the primarch and the Custodian exploded upwards, then buckled. The far side of the corridor dropped three feet. If they had cut that deep, thought Sicarius, the whole ship was about to be sectioned. He smelled the gunpowder tang of open space through his breathing grille before he activated void protocols, and sealed his armour against suffocation. Air roared outward, tearing up loose debris. It clattered off Sicarius’ battle plate as insistently as primitive machine-gun fire.

‘Primarch!’ Colquan shouted. Sicarius could not decide if he sounded anguished or enraged.

Guilliman looked across at Colquan, then he noticed something in the ceiling, turned, and ran towards Sicarius.

‘My lord! The other way! The other way!’ Colquan shouted.

The decompression gale swallowed his voice whole. His vox was dead, blunted by the necron’s denial attacks. His screaming voice was for him alone, sealed with him in his helmet.

Guilliman moved fast. Sicarius soon saw why. Blast doors were slamming down from the ceiling, cutting off the flow of air. The first went down near Colquan, shutting off the view of the hangar. Guilliman reached Sicarius half a second after the final door had slammed shut.

‘I could not make the gap. I would have been trapped,’ Guilliman explained. Sicarius nodded. He had seen that for himself.

A hush descended. Emergency lumens painted the corridor red and black. Gas jetted incessantly from a ruptured pipe, gathering on the floor, hiding

the bodies of dead Space Marines and broken alien androids in a soupy mist.

‘What now?’ Sicarius asked. ‘We are lost. We cannot fight off the entire necron fleet alone.’

‘We shall not need to.’

Guilliman was looking past him.

Sicarius spun around. At that moment, had he had a bolter in his fist rather than his sword, he would have opened fire in surprise.

The primarch’s pet xenos, Illiyanne Natasé, stood several yards down the way, next to an open side door, with three warriors of the Dire Avenger aspect, standing as if they had been watching all along.

‘Throne!’ hissed Sicarius.

‘I warned you this would happen,’ said the farseer. ‘I warned you and you did not listen.’

‘I did listen,’ said Guilliman. ‘I pay attention to what you say more than you will ever believe. Everything I hear I account for in my theoreticals. Theoretical – you warned me. Your master does not want me dead. If I do not listen, you will work to ensure that does not happen. Practical – you have done something about this situation. A contingency.’

‘How very arrogant,’ Natasé said. ‘How very human.’

‘Nevertheless, I assume you have come to offer me an alternative route off this ship.’

Sicarius looked sideways at his gene-sire. Had Guilliman known this would happen?

Natasé bowed his head. ‘I do. A ship approaches. My people answer the call. They reach across the space between the sea of souls and the world of dust, singing a way towards us. If we are quick, we might take it.’

‘Then lead on, farseer,’ said Guilliman, ‘and further cement the bonds between our peoples.’

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Chapter Forty-Five

CHANCE SURVIVAL

AN END TO IT ALL

UNUSUAL EXITS

A hit on the lower reaches of the command tower threw Dho Gan Mey off his feet. His head connected neatly with a hard metal edge. Gan Mey lost his senses for a second. He was standing, then he wasn't, then someone was helping him sit.

'My lord, are you hurt?'

Gan Mey's scalp was wet. He reached for it, found his hat gone and, predictably, a good deal of blood in its place.

'Apparently so,' he said, turning his glistening fingers in the light. 'Serious?'

The ensign tilted Gan Mey's head forward carefully. 'Only a cut, my lord.'

The ship trembled again. They both looked up. Gan Mey had been a voidsman all his life, and he knew the signs of serious damage. The trembling might be different, the result was the same. The ship was dying.

The ensign reached for a medical pouch. Gan Mey held up his hand.

'No time for that,' he said. 'Get me up.'

His head swam. No time for that either. The command deck was ruined. There were bodies there, people crushed by falling debris. It was always the

bloody statuary, he thought. The oculus was miraculously unbroken, and from the right-hand quadrant he had a fine view of the giant ship tearing the *Dawn of Fire* to pieces.

He was impressed, despite himself. The ship was a majestic, gargantuan thing; its wide-spread sickle jaws appeared ready to swallow the galaxy, and it might well, he thought. *We've met our match here.* Banks of heavy energy cannons fired in series, the lightning prongs of each energy stream hungrily licking into the *Dawn of Fire*'s wounds, deepening them, eating the ship alive.

The *Dawn of Fire* returned fire. Gan Mey counted the convulsive judder of each gun firing in the broadside. Half were offline.

'Any news on the primarch?'

'The *Aquila Resplendum* is away,' reported one of his officers. She was a young woman, serious-faced, concentrating ever so hard on her work to stop the fear spilling out of her eyes and taking control. 'No word if the primarch is aboard.'

Gan Mey searched his displays for the ident signum of the ship, but all of them were dancing with alien code infections. He couldn't see the eagle-shaped silhouette of the lander out of the oculus either. He expected it had fled to the rear. The mountain-tall side of the enemy flagship filled most of the area where he might conceivably have caught a glimpse of it. The space between was a hornet swarm of duelling fighter craft. Just above he could make out several vessels; they might be the forward elements of Battle Group Betaris, he thought, although he should have been sure. It was irritating how much he relied on his instruments these days. If the primarch had got away, he would be making for those ships. Together, the battle group might be able to hold the xenos flagship off long enough. The *Aquila Resplendum* might be able to outpace the enemy.

Too many mights, he thought.

Forward of their position, the story was worse. Alpharis was under punishing attack. The *Dawn of Fire*'s escorts were clouds of metal and gas. The other capital ships were struggling. The necrons weren't even trying to stop them from leaving, but flew alongside, repositioning constantly to get the best shot in a way the Imperial ships could not match. He caught the eye of the young officer, and saw it was more troubled than before. He was

frowning. He deliberately smoothed out his brow. He had to restrain his own emotions.

‘What is your name, lieutenant?’ he asked, adopting a commanding air that, at that moment, he did not feel. He doubted he would ever feel it again.

She looked up, confused. Her eyes flicked off to the right and widened a little when another explosion went off.

‘Look at me,’ he told her softly. She did. ‘Your name. Please.’

‘Hode, my lord,’ she said. ‘Hode, lieutenant third class.’

‘Your first name, I meant.’

‘Amitia,’ she said.

Gan Mey smiled at her. ‘Well, listen to me, Amitia. I know the primarch well. When he sets his mind to something, there is nothing that will stop him. Do you understand? He is the living embodiment of the Emperor’s will. We do our job here to protect him, because that is our duty. Soon our duty will be done, and we shall see for ourselves the eternal light of the Emperor. Pity the primarch, for his duty will last forever.’ This was not a rebuke, but intended to comfort. It took a moment for Hode to realise this, but then she nodded.

‘Sir.’

‘Very good.’ He looked back out through the oculus. An Imperial cruiser cut down between the two flagships, aflame from end to end, its drives locked to full motive.

It passed, burning.

He wiped the blood trickling into his eye aside with a braided cuff. ‘Carry on.’

‘Eloise. Eloise!’

The soft slapping on Athagey’s face became insistent.

‘Eloise, Emperor curse you, wake up!’

Athagey did not wish to awaken. She had thought herself dead, and the news that she was still alive, which was the only conclusion she could draw from the circumstances, was something of a disappointment.

‘Leave me be,’ she complained. She opened her eyes just the same.

‘Saint Aster save us,’ said Diomed. She rocked back on her heels. Athagey struggled up onto her elbows. Her head throbbed.

‘Take it easy,’ Diomed said, resting a gentle hand on her shoulder. ‘We got you up off the command deck. I think you have a concussion.’

Athagey reached for her monocular to call for its stream of data, but it was gone. She found instead a cut beneath her eye that matched the curve of its lower edge perfectly. She probed it gently as she looked around the Dead End. It had probably never held so many people. Apart from the handful of Naval armsmen standing guard, with their weapons pointing at the door, pretty much everyone was staring at her.

‘Stop gawping,’ she said gruffly. She got up, and incompletely stifled the resultant groan of pain. It escaped from the corner of her clamped lips as a reluctant ‘pfff!’

An ensign she could not recall ever seeing before hurried to her side and grasped her elbow, a most unwelcome gesture.

‘Are you alright, madam fleetmistress?’

‘Unhand me!’ she snarled. He stepped back.

She looked around accusingly. Concerned faces turned away.

‘What’s the status of the ship?’ She forced her way to the back of the room, pushing men aside so she could get at her drinks cabinet.

‘Dead in the void,’ said Diomed. ‘We lost the prow on impact and much of the first half of the neck. Most decks are open to the void. Casualties are near total. As far as I could tell before the ship’s internal sensors went out, the only significant pockets of atmosphere are up here, in the superstructure.’

Athagey nodded as if that all made perfect sense. ‘This is all of us?’

‘Pretty much.’

‘Right,’ she said. She had hoped for a more heroic death than suffocating in a room crammed with frightened people, but she had regained enough of her wits not to say so. She poured herself a drink instead. ‘Well, here we are then.’

She passed out her drinks. There was enough for a sip for each, no more, but it would have been churlish to keep it for herself. She thought of her stimms, but the pocket she’d kept them in was ripped off and the box was gone. She considered if Diomed had done that. She supposed it didn’t really matter any more.

Hours passed. The ship moaned and creaked as it died. The oxygen in the room dwindled. It was completely quiet, and Athagey wondered what was

happening outside, how many of the ships of Fleet Tertius had escaped. They'd given the enemy a bloody nose, but at enormous cost to themselves. An entire crusade fleet, almost destroyed, for what? A few score enemy ship kills, if that. She'd never heard of any xenos being that powerful. It almost made the threat from the Warmaster seem insignificant. Where would their sorceries and unclean uses of the warp get them in the face of these machines and their contra-empyric technologies? The Imperium could well die, but if it did, so would its betrayers.

A snort burst from her nostrils. Weary, oxygen-deprived faces lifted. There was a similarity between the lack of air and the necrons' stilling. Both represented a deprivation of some fundamental thing necessary for life, she realised.

'My apologies,' she said. 'A hard situation underlines the absurdity of life. I feel that–'

CLANG.

The impact of metal on metal shuddered the walls.

'What was–' someone began.

'Shhhh!' Athagey said. She got to her feet. Her armsmen were rousing themselves. Their void armour had its own air supply. They were quicker than the rest.

'Must be a debris shower,' someone said.

'That's not debris,' one of the armsmen shot back. He cocked his shotgun. It made a definitive click, as if it too was professing a deeply held and cuttingly profound opinion.

CLANG! Clang. Clangclangclangclangclang!

The armsmen came forward. Those officers who retained their sidearms drew them. The rest gathered into an instinctive huddle at the back of the room. Athagey reached for her own gun, but that too was gone.

Steady metallic footsteps approached the door outside. Whatever made them must be large for them to be heard through so thick a door.

'Boarders,' the sergeant said. 'Stand ready.'

A green point of light appeared at the centre of the door, and grew rapidly, until it precisely occupied the whole circumference of the door and not a hair's breadth more. Athagey guessed it would be exact to an atomic level.

The green intensified. How by the Emperor she wished she had her gun.

The door collapsed in a shower of metallic dust. Immediately the armsmen opened fire, a deafening racket in that confined space. A necron revealed directly behind the door fell back in a blaze of sparks as steel pellets pinged off its armour.

The shooting abruptly ceased. A tall, sinuous figure floated through the door, its hands moving in a series of passes, like the sleight-of-hand hucksters Athagey had once seen in port. A dangerous profession in the Imperium, presenting tricks that could be misperceived as magic. This being was no magician. It stank of oils and electricity, of stone-cold tombs and hot metal. Time stopped in a bubble around it. The armsmen froze mid-action. The flames of their guns licked at the air, unchanging. She could see the pellets mid-flight, glinting in frozen light. The whole area went black. Nothing, not even light, was getting in or out. A total stasis field.

The border of the stasis field was visible as a strange skin, like glue wrinkling as it dried. She could see the boundary between where things stopped changing and where things changed still; there was no other way to describe it. The being in the middle of the field was unaffected, as were the light-woven glyphs it conjured with its hands. They alone were visible somehow. The machine continued to move its fingers around and around each other, all the while staring at Athagey with a single, unblinking glass eye, surrounded by complete stillness. Of course, the Imperium had stasis technology, but not quite like this.

There were more of the machines outside. They came within, careful to stop at the edge of the sphere of arrested time. The human officers at the rear of the room pulled in closer. A hot smell of fear came off them. At the last, they were animals facing machines they could not comprehend.

The necron leader was obvious. Taller, his body more finely made, a high crest of gold on his head, and a cloak of living metal crawling around his feet. He produced a small box that appeared to be made of shifting segments of black. Soft blue light glowed from inside.

Then it spoke to her.

‘You are the captain of this vessel, and the lord of this fleet?’

Its voice was deep, with a machine’s vibrato that accentuated its artificiality.

‘I am.’

‘I am Phaeron Zhulkan, emissary and xenologist to his majesty, the Silent King Szarekh, lord of all dynasties, and speculator after samples for his majesty’s esteemed sage, the Illuminor Szeras. We have much to discuss, you and I.’

‘What?’

‘I believe I speak your language correctly, and that you heeded and understood,’ he said, then he spoke to the thin, sinister mechanoid floating in the centre of the timeless field. Time snapped back into action. The black vanished. Bullets flew. Galvanised by the return of noise, the last few officers of the *Saint Aster* opened fire. Lines of blue las-fire sped at the necrons. They did nothing. With a casualness that was obscene when witnessed in a machine, Zhulkan tossed the small cube into the room. Diomed turned to Athagey with a question on her face that she never got to ask. The cube expanded with a flash of that blue light, the little squares that made it expanding to encompass the whole of the Dead End, then it snapped back to its original size, and floated in the middle of the room, a room that was now empty of every human being but Athagey.

Las impact sites glowed cooling reds on Zhulkan’s body. As Athagey watched, the metal flowed back, rippled, and his armour was whole once more.

‘What did you do?’

The phaeron’s skeletal, metal face could not move, but there was no mistaking the humour in his revolting alien voice.

‘You would not understand, so I will not attempt to explain. Listen to me.’ He held up his hand. ‘You may come with me, or you may join them. My facilities are far more comfortable than those of Illuminor Szeras, I assure you.’

There was something about the phaeron’s tone that, had it come from a human, she would have recognised instantly. From a skull-faced android, it took a little time for her brain to process it before she grasped it. Even then, she couldn’t believe it. Was he making a joke?

‘My men…’

‘Are alive, but no longer your concern. Come with me. You are my prisoner. I am no brute. I am a civilised man. You will enjoy all the rights a civilised being accords another civilised being when they are captured in war. Though forgive me if you are not aware of this custom. Your people

are not known for their kindness to others. You have a reputation for barbarism.’ Zhulkan laughed. He actually laughed, as if he were alive, a person. Human, even.

He held out a hand, metal fingers unfurling smoothly. Behind him, his warriors looked on with unblinking, dead eyes.

The news that her men lived decided her. If they had been dead, she would have thrown herself into a suicidal attack, got it over with. For the Emperor and all that, right to the end. But while they lived, her responsibilities remained. While they lived, they could be saved. While they lived, there was a little hope.

She tugged her tunic down, smoothed it flat, and stood tall, as an officer of the Imperium should in the face of inferior xenos.

‘Very well,’ she said. ‘Please accept my surrender.’

‘Very good,’ said the necron, and she could have sworn that he was smiling.

They were aboard the command deck. The end approached.

Space Marine boltguns snapped their angry barks. So distinctive, that progression of sounds. If you concentrated, you could separate out the din of their firing into distinct stages. The bang of the initial accelerant charge, the snap of the rocket motor firing, a second bang as they broke the sound barrier, and a final loud crack as their charges detonated. Ordinarily, it was difficult if not impossible to tease out the parts, and with them firing on automatic, the bolters gave out a continuous, bellicose roar. But if you were sharp, you could hear.

Nothing sharpened the mind like approaching death.

Dho Gan Mey looked over the railing onto the command deck floor. The last of the crew were abandoning their duties, taking cover behind their stations. Las-beams cut through the smoke.

Necrons clanked onto the deck, each footstep a death knell, ringing out the time of execution. Their weapons made harsh buzzing sounds as they fired, and a crackle like water dropped into hot fat when they hit. The Space Marines weathered the blasts, more or less. The streams pitted their ceramite, turning smooth armour plates into rough surfaces reminiscent of rock. One hit, on the whole, was not enough to penetrate their protection, and the Space Marines reaped a toll in broken machine parts. They stood

their ground, working together with their brothers to riddle the xenos warriors until they dropped in shattered pieces, then moved on to the next.

The effects of the xenos weapons on human flesh were horrendous.

A shield officer hit by an energy beam was devoured by it, layer by layer. Gan Mey watched him stripped down, as if he had been held tight against an industrial abrading drum. His skin, muscles, bone, all gone quickly, but not so quickly that the man didn't feel it, and not so quickly that Gan Mey did not see. The man's scream turned into a bubbling rasp that somehow cut through the clamour of weapons. It was the single most horrible thing Gan Mey had ever heard.

A tech-priest let loose a blast from a back-mounted neutron laser. It connected, dropping the target instantly, its machineries scrambled by the ingenuity of Mars. It was a small triumph. The necrons identified this threat immediately. Three intersecting gauss beams turned him into a red mist and a fading scream.

Gan Mey couldn't tear himself away from the slaughter. The necrons refocused their efforts on the Space Marines, switching targets robotically from the deck crew and armsmen, whose puny laspistols and Naval shotguns did no harm to them whatsoever. Single gauss beams became multiple shots, the necrons mimicking the tactic of concentrated fire that the Space Marines used against them, and the champions of humanity died.

Gan Mey was staring so intently he only belatedly noticed a single necron warrior staring up at him. When their eyes locked, a score more metal heads moved in eerie synchronicity to stare up at the rear admiral. A dozen of them broke off from the fight, swivelling simultaneously on the balls of their feet, and marched towards the armoured doors leading from the command deck to the strategium complex. Fixed weapon emplacements around the entrance opened up as the aliens approached the upper decks.

They didn't last long, and the sound of boltgun fire was diminishing, replaced with a hush interrupted only by the rumble of explosions, and the clanking necron march.

Gan Mey depressed a vox-button, opening a channel to the entire ship.

'This is Dho Gan Mey, acting fleetmaster of Crusade Fleet Primus. The enemy are aboard. All remaining hands, abandon ship. I repeat, abandon ship. The *Dawn of Fire* is lost. The Emperor protects.' His finger left the

button with a click. ‘Lock this place down!’ he commanded. ‘Close the shutters. Seal and deactivate the doors.’

His last few staff worked quickly. The open wall between the lower strategium and the command deck began their slow closure. The doors at the top of the stairs into the Grand Strategium started to roll shut.

‘Too late!’

A panicked officer flung up an arm. Metal hands gripped the edge of the doorway. The portal weighed over five tons, but those hands halted it. More grabbed the lip. There was a flare of sparks from the far side, and the hands pushed the door back into its housing. Small constructs flooded through, held aloft on contra-grav fields. They ignored the personnel, and went straight for the cogitators, plunged probes into them, and began to feed on the data within.

Necrons marched out of the Grand Strategium, firing patiently. The man who had shouted was hit by one of their infernal weapons. He screamed, gurgled, died. His gristly remains folded wetly to the floor.

Gan Mey’s remaining staff opened fire. They too died messily.

The necrons ceased firing and marched purposefully at Gan Mey, the steady phantom lights of their burning eyes fixed on him. They meant to take him alive, and why would they not? He knew many things that would benefit the enemy. It chilled him. Not that they wished to capture him – gathering intelligence was a part of war, he would have done it himself – but that these soulless metal monsters had enough intellect to know they should.

The Imperium had massively underestimated the threat of these beings.

Gan Mey aimed at one of necrons, and thought better of it. What good would one las-shot do against these things?

He had another option.

He took a deep breath, and pressed the muzzle to his temple.

‘Ave Imperator,’ he said, and squeezed the trigger.

Metal hands were already reaching for him when his body hit the floor.

Alarms blared from every quarter of the ship. Sicarius had abandoned his shield as an encumbrance during their flight. He kept his eyes on the primarch. A rising tide of fear that they would not escape and the primarch would die rose in him. He was not accustomed to fear. He thought he might

drown in it, and it made him frantic. Perhaps that was why he was not focused. Perhaps that was why he was wounded.

A heavy necron subtype stepped in front of him, surprising him. It swiped at him with the heavy blade attached to the end of its weapon. It was awkward and poorly weighted – Sicarius doubted he himself could have wielded it effectively in combat – but the alien machine did a fine job of smashing it into his leg. Pain raced up his body. In return, he decapitated the necron with a single cut of his power sword. The body sagged to its knees right into his path. He tried to barge it aside, but there was no strength in his leg, only pain, and the machine was so heavy. It folded around him, pushed him to the side so his feet tangled, his injured leg gave out a searing protest, and he was carried down to the floor.

He fought his way free of dead metal limbs. Even as he was rising, teleportation shine was coursing over its body, and it phased from sight.

The heavy tread of necron warrior constructs clanked over the noise of the alarms, the fire and the rumbling of the dying ship. Sicarius was moving again, away from them. He was limping, the damage to his leg slowing him.

Guilliman turned back, searching through the flame and smoke with concerned eyes to find his protector.

‘Cato!’ he bellowed. ‘To me!’

The primarch raised the Hand of Dominion. Its underslung guns chugged their throaty song of death, and heavy bolt-rounds raced down the corridor. Guilliman did not waste a shot, and nor did any come close to harming his gene-son. Sicarius’ armour’s pharmacopeia dispensed analgesics. His thigh plate was open, jagged metal pushed into his quadricep, and the blue ceramite had turned black with blood. There were not enough drugs to dull that pain.

Guilliman fired again. The enemy had seen him, and were running for him, firing their weapons. A shimmer on the air stopped the braided energy beams dead an inch from the surface of his armour. Guilliman allowed the foe to come no closer than the reach of his sword, swept the Emperor’s blade round, and shattered them into fragments.

The howl of that sword. The lick of its forever-burning flames. It was no natural weapon. Being so close to it made Sicarius nauseous.

‘You are injured,’ the primarch said.

‘A lucky hit. I was surprised.’

‘I will stay with you. Come.’

Sicarius meant to protest, but a look from the primarch silenced him.

‘What manner of father would I be if I willingly abandoned a son when he might easily be saved?’ Guilliman covered their retreat. The necrons became wary. They wanted the primarch, that much was clear, but they dared not come close. Sicarius knew a little of the necrons. He knew their lords could step from the air, that they possessed teleportation technologies of high refinement. He was on edge, expecting another to come to claim the Imperial Regent. None did.

He laughed.

‘Something amuses you, my son?’

‘They send their soldiers, but the higher forms do not come themselves again,’ said Sicarius. ‘They are frightened.’

‘They are right to be,’ said Guilliman.

Sicarius stumbled. Guilliman extinguished the fires of his father’s sword and locked it to his back. With his freed hand, he grabbed Sicarius’ upper arm.

‘Let me support you.’

The ship shook with a heavy impact. There was an explosion somewhere nearby. The sound of gunfire and screams was a constant undertone to the blaring alarms and crackle of firearms.

‘No. Leave me. Save yourself.’

‘How about I order you to let me support you?’ said the primarch. ‘I would prefer not to make my kindness a command.’

Sicarius nodded, and lifted his arm. Guilliman grasped it and dragged him on his way.

‘Keep up, mon-keigh!’

One of Natasé’s bodyguard raced past, joining the battle dance of its fellows. Sicarius could not tell if it was male or female. The differences were not pronounced enough in their kind. They were so swift, darting around the alien machines in a way that made them seem lumbering and hopeless ogres from a primitive tale, too stupid to grab their prey. The aeldari seemed weak to him, so frail. Their limbs were thin, their armour so light it looked like pointless decoration, but the way they moved… The leader of Natasé’s bodyguard ran directly at a wall away from a pursuing necron, turning aside from the chasing energy streams without even looking

behind. It did not slow as it reached edge of the corridor, but ran up the wall, and used its momentum to turn the run into a flawless backflip. As it arced over the necron, it cut down, so gently it appeared, with a blade that was light and thin, but it hit hard, and the necron's arm dropped free. The aeldari landed lightly behind.

The machine didn't have time to turn around before the aeldari ran it through. The point burst out of its chest, the power field shattering the metal. The necron spasmed, the light of its innards died, and the aeldari drew the blade smoothly out and was away, sprinting through the fight past the primarch. Nothing hit it. Nothing could.

'Come, Sicarius,' Guilliman said to him. 'Come with me.'

They reached Natasé's quarters. The farseer and his warriors were engaged in a ferocious firefight with the invaders all the way. Shurikens hissed into metal with little clicks. One of the aeldari was dead on the ground. As the humans approached, one of the others was retrieving the gem from the front of its armour, which now glowed with an inner light.

'Quickly, primarch,' warned Natasé.

Guilliman gunned down a trio of necrons coming up the passage.

'You must go into my chambers. The gate is there.'

Sicarius limped. His leg was almost completely stiff, and each footstep sent an electric jag of pain into his groin despite his pharmacopeia's numbing drugs. Guilliman dragged him inside and the door slammed down. The aeldari's quarters were a jarring mix of the human and the alien. Evidently, they'd tried to make themselves at home. It hadn't been successful.

Metal squealed. The necrons were forcing the door, their robotic movements driven by a hideous energy, so that they seemed more alive than he had seen them before. Guilliman fired into them, blasting apart the first. The second died to a pinpoint thrust through its eye from the aeldari exarch. Natasé blew a third apart with a bolt of psychic power.

'Through here!' the farseer shouted.

The remaining Aspect Warriors flung innumerable shurikens behind them. The farseer moved with unbecoming haste, nearly tripping on his scattered possessions. They went into his bedchamber, where Natasé moved to the wall and wrenched a rich hanging down with no more care than if it had been a bedsheet.

Buried into the plasteel of the wall was an archway made of the waxy, ivory-like plasteks of the aeldari. It was smooth and repellently alive, like an exposed bone. It framed a misty aperture that glowed like candlelight.

The farseer plunged in. Guilliman dragged Sicarius with him after. A tunnel that seemed partly formed of mist and partly of gut extended before them. It shifted pliably as they ran up it. An aeldari was ahead, a psyker, a way-singer. It exchanged words with Natasé and joined them as they ran.

The whistle of shurikens followed them. The aeldari warriors did not join them straightaway, and Sicarius thought them lost. But then they passed through the shimmering portal, still firing behind them.

‘We must be quick. The gate is crude. I cannot close it off before we are aboard my people’s vessel,’ said Natasé. ‘But it is not far. Look.’

He pointed ahead, the usual languid fluidity of his race gone, replaced with nervous battle energy. Ahead, the shifting corridor ended. More aeldari in the costumes of corsairs watched them, their guns levelled down the corridor.

The fleeing warriors spilled into the chamber: the aeldari witches, the primarch, Sicarius, then the Dire Avengers. The gate on the ship stood free on a platform, its frame like crossed, saurian ribs.

‘Close the gate! Close it now!’ Natasé yelled.

But something had a hold of the gateway. The ribs flexed on their podium. They cracked, and green light shone from the cracks. The aeldari were shouting at each other. Sicarius did not understand their speech, but it was clear the necrons were forcing entry somehow, another thing that was beyond the wit of man, but within the grasp of these vile, alien machines.

The very air split. Dazzling green shone upon them. The cracks broadened, smoothed out, became a growing ellipse that opened upon another room, on another ship.

The walls, floors and instruments were all of blackstone. A green light suffused everything, glaring balefully around the instruments and control globes set into consoles around the deck, where hunched metal creatures worked.

At the centre of this hive of xenos activity was the Silent King.

He was immense, far taller than his minions. Behind him was an oculus of unimaginable size, where Sicarius could see the *Dawn of Fire* dying from a million lurid beam cuts. The Silent King had his back to this scene of

defeat, and was looking through the gateway, directly at them. The necron lord approached, until he and Guilliman were standing directly opposite each other. From this being Sicarius felt a strange pressure, an immense and ancient will, capable of anything.

Guilliman released Sicarius and unlocked the Sword of the Emperor from his back.

Behind the necron king, the *Dawn of Fire* finally gave in to its tormentors. It died cleanly, in an orb of fusion fire. Debris spread in every direction. The flames of its end reflected from the hunched, uncaring metal figures.

Activity on the alien command deck ceased, and every being upon it turned to face the primarch.

‘You and I shall decide this now,’ said the Silent King.

Still he did not speak for himself. This time the words issued from the mouths of every one of his servants, a chorus of dust-dry whispers that combined into a voice as soulless and terrifying as the passage of aeons. The Silent King lifted his massive spear, and stepped down from the floating dais. Lesser necrons were gathering around his floating command throne, ready to board with their master.

Guilliman raised his blade, pressed the quillons to his face in salute, ignited the blade, and readied himself to fight.

As the first necron stepped through, Natasé gave out a shrill cry and swung his staff hard at the gate. It cut cleanly through the left spar, trailed through the middle, and in doing so passed momentarily onto the necron ship, before slamming into the right side of the archway. Both spars toppled, bleeding glowing gel.

The gate imploded, blowing out a hot wind that buffeted all in the room. The spars smouldered with a smell like burning bones. A single necron foot, severed at the ankle, rested on the gate platform. One of the corsairs jabbered something in its mellifluous tongue and kicked it angrily.

The farseer turned to Guilliman.

‘Your debts to us grow, primarch,’ said Natasé.

Sicarius watched as Guilliman doused the fires of the Emperor’s Sword. He let the point of the blade rest on the deck.

‘I thank you, lord farseer. You have my gratitude, and that of all mankind,’ said Guilliman neutrally. ‘Now, if it would be amenable to you, kindly return me to my people.’

Cawl was humming one of his maddening ditties when the group limped into the control nexus. The surviving Space Marines exchanged greetings. There was an Apothecary with Cawl's group, and he went to Messinius immediately. Primus didn't listen to what was said.

'Ah!' said Cawl, pretending to have only just noticed them. 'So you managed to rescue our bold lord lieutenant, eh?'

'He is seriously wounded,' said Primus. 'I do not think he will survive.'

Cawl tutted. 'My boy, your lack of faith in me is hurtful. I am sure I can patch him up.' He continued to work as he spoke.

'How? We are trapped. It will take time to call our transports back to the surface, and Messinius has no time left.'

Cawl chuckled. 'You're right about that. No time, no time!'

'Then why are you amused, creator?' Primus was bone tired. His brief moments of euphoria were gone.

'Because we're not going to go out that way.'

'What are you talking about?'

'This, my boy, is more than simply a control mechanism for the pylon network.' He looked up at Primus, his mechadendrites and hands still flying over the control mechanisms. 'It is, I believe, a Pharos.'

'You have told me of this place. On Sotha, discovered at the time of the Heresy War and emptied of its secrets long ago. I thought there was only one.'

'When I say *a* Pharos, yes, I'm surmising here. Because wouldn't it make sense if there were more than one? Nobody knew who built it, after all. According to ancient texts – ancient texts Guilliman doesn't know I have, by the way, so let's keep this between ourselves – the xenos device allowed instantaneous transportation between two points in space. What use would that have been if you were coming and going from boring old Sotha?'

'Like the webway?'

'No, not like the webway at all, my boy! Pay attention. A network of pharii would be better than that. Much better. By means of an artificial wormhole, I believe, the ancient beings who built the Pharos could move through the materium. Not the warp, not the interstice, but realspace. Instantly. It turns out that those beings are the necrons, which I wasn't one hundred per cent sure about before, but now it seems rather obvious, doesn't it? Don't they do the same thing with their inertia-less drives, captive wormholes, instant,

long-range teleportation and other whatnottery? So, yes, we're in a tricky situation. Luckily, I'm a genius, and I'm going to use their expertise.' He grinned over his shoulder. 'I'm going to send everyone home. Now, get them all onto that, over there.'

Without ceasing his work, Cawl pointed at one of the flat stages of blackstone by the console. A humming rose from every part of the room. The pyramid vibrated.

'Quickly now!' Cawl said. 'I have deactivated the pyramid complex's canoptek beings, but it's not going to last. Their cogitation systems are already fighting back and the world-mind is prioritising their reactivation.' He smiled again. 'Imagine if I could control them outright? Wouldn't that be something.'

Primus looked over at the inert mechanisms cluttering the floor. Green light flickered deep in their eyes.

A long green spark leapt up from the control globe and cracked against Cawl's fingers. 'Oh, by the Omnissiah, this thing is fighting me!' Cawl let out a small sound of frustration. 'There is so much information in here, so much. If only I could get at it, then all our problems might be solved…'

'Creator,' Primus warned. He slammed his boot down hard on a scarab as it rose up a few inches off the floor.

'Yes, yes, I am concentrating! Everyone onto the platform, now!'

The surviving group, some thirty strong, made their way onto the platform. Primus watched with dismay as the machine things twitched and clicked and began to right themselves.

'Creator!'

'Hold on! One miscalculation and I could project us into the heart of a star, or into the throne room of some waking necron princeling, and wouldn't that be a disaster?'

Images flickered over the console. A room on a ship. Primus recognised it as the embarkation deck on one of the Space Marine cruisers. Surprised men were turning to look.

A bolt-shot boomed behind him. A rising scarab was blasted to pieces.

A steady pulsing of buried machines shook the floor. Green light shone from the grooves cut into the walls.

'Hold on!' Cawl yelled. Before he ran from the console, he reached into his robes, and pulled out a compact melta bomb. Even as he operated the

alien device, other limbs primed and activated the explosive.

‘We can’t have them following us, can we?’

He joined the others on the stage.

Necron constructs rose in clouds to face them.

‘Crea–’

There was a sensation of tumbling. Primus took an involuntary step, and it felt like he had walked over a cliff edge, so when his foot hit instead metal, he almost fell in surprise.

He was on the cruiser with the rest of their group.

He held up his hands in front of his face. He was unharmed.

Cawl was looking about himself curiously, as if he expected to be somewhere else entirely.

‘Now that was fascinating.’ He sounded unusually thoughtful, even for him.

The last surviving Apothecary spoke. ‘My lord archmagos, Lord Messinius is dying.’

‘What? Right. Yes. Very well, I have a solution to that. Take him to your apothecarion. If I might borrow it?’

‘Of course, my lord. You are the master of our physiology, if anyone can save him, you can.’

‘Tish!’ said Cawl. ‘You flatter me, although you happen to be right. Perhaps it is time our lord lieutenant here underwent a little upgrade.’

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Chapter Forty-Six

PRIME CONDUIT

MACRAGGE'S HONOUR

THE CAWL INFERIOR

When Cawl went to see Guilliman, he made sure to wear a confident personality mix. Guilliman was a tricky fellow to deal with. Even Cawl, a Prime Conduit of the Omnissiah, struggled with a primarch, therefore it was important he felt confident. He was aware that people found him irritatingly self-possessed anyway, no matter what matrix of traits he chose for himself, but when dealing with a primarch, who was by Cawl's estimation a distillation of humanity – humanity cubed, he liked to think – with a charisma strong enough to tame worlds, it was important that one had a personality of similar potency, or his presence would utterly overwhelm you.

Belisarius Cawl would allow no one to overwhelm him.

Guilliman's chambers had been among the first to be decontaminated and blessed when the *Macragge's Honour* had been delivered back into the hands of the Ultramarines, and now they were full of crates. The palace spire was far more magnificent than Guilliman's quarters aboard the *Dawn of Fire*, as befitted a ship of such size, one whose like had not been built in the Imperium for thousands of years.

Guilliman’s private museum, the Hall of Armaments, was full of historitors and servitors stocking displays. Many of the plinths were empty, but Cawl noted examples of the most exquisite ancient technology. He passed an intact set of Mark I power armour, its bulky shoulder plates crowding the open-faced helm, where a mannequin’s face stared from machine-cramped isolation. Next to it was an early pattern of boltgun, and other weapons, dredged up from the past. Cawl found himself slowing a little, tempted to examine them in depth. He, or rather that part of him that had once been someone named Sedayne, was intimately familiar with the devices, but they were so rare now, and he had not seen them for many millennia. They were like old friends. He made himself hurry on, keeping his ocular sensors forward until he spotted something that really did halt him in his many-legged tracks.

Upon a scaffolding, several artisans worked on a large glassaic window. For the moment the void shutters were firmly sealed, and the faint shine of a temporary atmospheric field glimmered inside it.

The men were only two-thirds of their way through their work, but it was clear already what they were creating: it was a stellar map, and though stylised and full of whimsical detail, it clearly depicted Ultramar. Not the meagre handful of systems that Guilliman had reduced it to far back in time, but Ultramar as was, score upon score of systems, containing the legendary Five Hundred worlds. Guilliman had been open about reuniting his realm of old, and had said to those close to him, including Cawl, that he had made a mistake in breaking it up. For Cawl, the confession had been an unimportant detail, a little scrap of data to add to the unexplorable mountains of facts he guarded in his memory banks. Politics were not his focus.

Seeing the map positioned where anyone who had business with the primarch would see it, he realised what a declaration of intent Guilliman’s decree was, and he saw that it was dangerous. Whatever his stated reasons for rebuilding Ultramar, to anyone looking on the endeavour from outside, it could only look like empire-building. Cawl had not thought for a moment that Guilliman wished to usurp his father’s throne, as certain parties within the Imperium feared, but seeing that map gave him pause, and despite his choice of brash personality, he felt the cold clutch of unease around his mechanical hearts.

He hurried on.

Cawl passed a trio of priests mumbling over censers. The flock of servo-skulls trailing them blared devotional music and automatic blessings. He reached the approach to the primarch's librarium. A set of doors was guarded by a pair of Maldovar Colquan's Custodian Guard, who opened it for him. He proceeded down a corridor to the inner doors, these held by six of the Victrix Guard, who were more protective than ever now they were aboard a ship that had been in enemy hands. Captain Sicarius scowled his usual scowl. Cawl nodded at him with a friendliness the Ultramarine chose not to return. The Victrix Guard opened the door and admitted him.

The librarium occupied a small spire of its own. The central room was open all the way to the top of the steeple, and dominated by a high cylindrical stack of bookshelves. It was huge. Even so, it struggled to contain Roboute Guilliman's presence.

There were patches of shiny metal where the room had been repaired. It looked like some effort had gone into despoiling the place. Ministorum servo-skulls swooped overhead, giving autocatechisms. In the upper galleries, Sisters of Battle singing hymns accompanied menials with buckets of paint. They really were taking no chances after the ship's stint with the Red Corsairs.

Guilliman was at his desk, seemingly oblivious to it all, like a gentleman spending a productive rest day in his silent tabularium.

'Good day, archmagos,' said Guilliman. He was hunched over his work, an autoquill in one hand, data-lines feeding out of his armour into half a dozen slates and portable cogitators. The sight was comical, this giant of a man in a tank's worth of armour, hunched over his chores like an apprentice logistician. Cawl came close to letting out a binharic hoot of amusement, and thought with dismay he might have opted for too strong a sense of humour for the occasion. He didn't believe in emotional vaults, or in such extreme practices as the Rite of Pure Thought; to be properly human was to feel. Emotion was a guide on the path of true knowledge. Still, he locked his giggles down hard.

'And to you too, most brilliant of the Omnissiah's creations.'

Normally, Cawl would have performed an elaborate bow. These little courtly displays were always mocking, his little dig at the pomposities of

power. He decided against it. Roboute Guilliman did not appear to be in the mood for frivolity.

‘I am busy,’ said Guilliman. ‘That disaster cost us dearly. I must rectify the situation immediately.’ He glanced up. ‘I must ask you to restrict your usual prolixity, archmagos.’

‘Naturally,’ said Cawl. ‘I shall be brief. If I may ask, how do you intend to deal with the situation now?’

‘A policy of direct confrontation did not work, evidently. Therefore, I must return to our prior strategy of containment, until more can be learned of this Silent King.’ Guilliman sat up and pushed aside the ledger. He was unusually irritable. ‘Which means more forces locked down here, facing a threat that we may not be able to overcome, and weakening our efforts elsewhere in Imperium Sanctus, all while Nihilus burns.’

‘Ah, the trials of leadership,’ said Cawl, not unsympathetically. ‘I am sorry you must bear them.’

He meant it. He was a man who had little time for hierarchies and deference, especially when blindly followed, and made his opinions known, loudly. But Guilliman was suffering, and Cawl, despite his many augmetics, had been born with an empathy that had only grown more profound as the centuries ticked by, though he did his best to ignore it half the time. ‘It is the will of the Machine God that exceptional men must take up exceptional burdens.’

‘As every weak man who looks to a strong man to save him has ever said,’ said Guilliman bitterly.

‘This is not like you, my friend,’ said Cawl. ‘Despair is a garment that fits you poorly.’

‘I do not like to lose,’ said Guilliman. His blue eyes were cold as ice chips. ‘And we lost.’

Cawl had been acquainted with Guilliman long enough to be aware of the temper that bubbled away, almost entirely hidden, under the primarch’s carefully cultivated personality. It always surprised him to see it. When he did, it worried him, because it made him think of the primarch’s brothers, and their even greater propensity for rage. It must have been a dominant component of the Emperor’s own personality, he thought, for it to be so readily expressed in His engineered sons. Why, he had seen it himself, bare as genetic code, there in the Sangprimus Portum, shot through all the

materials that went into the creation of the primarchs and the Adeptus Astartes. They were made as weapons, all of them. He could see that anger had its utility in such beings, but the dangers of rage were equally large, if not larger. The fact the Emperor encouraged it suggested to Cawl that He had been at ease with fury, and sometimes that troubled Cawl. The Emperor was the Omnissiah, in his mind that was an indisputable fact. If god was not perfect, how could man attain perfection? Maybe this was one of the secrets of true comprehension, that which all tech-priests sought.

'We are caught in a vice,' the primarch went on. 'Between the jaws of Chaos and the xenos. This was a bad battle to lose.'

'You will persevere, I am sure.'

'I have no choice but to, have I?' said Guilliman. 'Working to preserve the ungrateful wretches of Terra who work against me to guard their own power, even as the edifice that sustains them burns to the ground.'

'My lord?' said Cawl. He rarely used Guilliman's titles in private. That was how worried he was. 'Are you well?'

'Forgive me,' Guilliman said, putting aside his choler. He closed his eyes. When he opened them, his anger had gone. 'You asked to see me, not to hear me complain. Why have you come to see me?'

'Perhaps I might lighten your mood. I am closer to my goals, and as lofty and important as yours are, I think we both know that if I manage to achieve what I hope to achieve, then we will stand a far greater chance of victory.'

'Of survival,' Guilliman corrected him flatly. 'Victory must wait.'

'Survival, victory, the two in the case of the Imperium are interchangeable,' said Cawl, wobbling his hand equivocally. 'I gained a great deal of insight into the operation of the necrons' machines on Planet 7/2. I am confident that my goal of mastering their technology is within reach.'

'That is good news,' said Guilliman. 'What do you need?'

'I need several things,' said Cawl measuredly. It was a chore to keep himself from grandstanding or quipping; he really had made a massive miscalculation regarding his personality matrices today. An occasional glance into the primarch's deadly serious eyes helped him remain grave. 'I require a testbed system, for a start. Somewhere with a minor warp rift that

acts as predictably as possible, a contradiction in terms that may seem. It needs a planet nearby, to establish pylons upon.’

‘I assume that you already have a selection of targets in mind.’

‘Well, obviously, times being what they are, there are plenty of potential choices, but my needs are very specific, therefore there are in fact only four viable options. This one here is my preferred.’

Cawl datacast his choice to one of Guilliman’s many screens. The primarch glanced down at it.

‘The 108/Beta-Kalapus-9 System? I am unfamiliar with it.’

‘It is not technically in the Imperium,’ said Cawl.

‘Xenos world?’

‘Uninhabited, at least until recently,’ said Cawl. ‘Little life potential, cold, resource poor, pointless for us to take it. It has no common name, just the Astra Cartographica designation, but the system is sometimes colloquially referred to as the Pit of Raukos. There are a number of reasons why this system would suit my purposes. The rift there is small, and trapped within the system by the pull of the star, which it is in the process of consuming. The rift is minor enough, you will note, not to shrug off the bonds of reality entirely. Due to interactions between the rift, the star, and the surrounding worlds, the pit opens to predictable cycles, thus presenting the tantalising opportunity of gaining control data that will help me calibrate my experimental results. If I am to create an Imperial network of pylons of any scale, then it is imperative they are set up to precise parameters. Too little of the stilling effect, and they will not prevent intrusion of the warp into the materium.’ He steepled his hands. ‘Too much, and we have the problem of spiritual extinguishment. We want to usurp the necron technology for our own ends, not do their work for them.’

Guilliman looked at the data-slate, reading further into the information Cawl had sent him.

‘There is an enemy presence there. Iron Warriors and Word Bearers. They are establishing a fortress world, according to this report,’ Guilliman said.

‘Whatever they are doing, the fact that they are there is the important point,’ said Cawl smugly.

‘I understand,’ said Guilliman. ‘This is a valid target. We would attack it anyway. Any move against it will look like any other attack by the Indomitus Crusade on the enemy. They will not be able to divine our true

reason for going there, not through mundane means, and even if they predict the assault they will assume we are merely following our usual habits of war.'

'Exactly. I have some skill in strategic thinking,' Cawl said, without a shred of modesty. 'If we keep this to ourselves, and do not let our reasons for going there spread beyond our inner circles, then the chances of the enemy figuring out what our ultimate goal is are practically nil, even with the use of sorcery. Both of us are heavily warded against psychic meddling. The enemy do have their ways, but the fewer the people who know, the greater the effort they must exert to gather true intelligence. The summoning of medius-level powers, greater daemons of fell repute, tricksy oracles, and so forth. A simple attack on a valid target will not rouse their suspicion enough for them to bother trying.'

'If we take this system, then how long will it be before you will be able to perform your experiments, and then repeat them at scale?'

Cawl looked askance at the regent. His aged face pulled into an apologetic expression. 'I do not know. I have the knowledge to reproduce a form of the pylons, though they are not as efficient as those of necron make. I also require a large amount of blackstone, but my Conclave Acquisitorius is already undertaking efforts to secure an adequate supply. Neither of those things are major obstacles, but the real difficulty is that I lack the central control coding that would enable the sort of transdimensional coordination the pylons require. They have to work across cosmic distances in perfect synchronicity, you see.'

'You could do this with human technology.'

'Technically? I suppose I could. In reality, the practical, to borrow your turn of phrase, it is nearly impossible with Imperial technology, and if we are to speak a minor blasphemy between ourselves, it is doubtful that even at our height, humanity could have replicated the necrons' technology exactly. The nature of the Great Work itself is against us there, as any electromagnetically coded information transmitted at distance must be sent at exactly the right moment, and the problem is multiplied greatly in difficulty by the temporally corruptive effects of the empyrean that the materium is currently suffering. A psychic control system provides us with even more problems regarding timeliness and stability, but a fully necron control system, subordinated to our commands – well, that would

circumvent all these difficulties and obviate the need for complex calculations, eliminating unreliable outcomes.

‘In order to do this, a further ability I must master is direct communication with the necron machines. The higher abominations are intimately linked to their devices via extra-dimensional non-warp technologies that I am only beginning to understand, and then only in the broadest sense. They communicate in real time, across the galaxy, no matter the distance. My initial investigations suggest the use of an intermediary dimension, like that the aeldari webway inhabits, but if it is the same one or some different interstitial space, I do not know. In order to be successful, I require similar control over their machines to that which they possess. If I can gain that, then the remainder of my tasks, and the struggle against the necrons themselves, will become significantly easier. One advantage they have over us is their technological mastery. Whether you follow the warnings completely and believe xenos knowledge to be a perversion of the True Path or not, it is simply a fact. Closing our eyes to it, shouting hosannas to the Machine God and waving our aspergillums around will not change that. They outmatch us.’

‘Assuming the best case scenario, that you gather all you need, learn how to make it work together, and survive, how long will this take?’ asked Guilliman. ‘I have to cross to Imperium Nihilus within a few years at most. There are only two warp conduits large enough to accept the size of force I must take with me. One of those routes is in the hands of the enemy, the other is unstable. I have been told that I would be able to cross at least once via the Attilan Gate, but it must be made stable.’

‘You were told that by other magi,’ said Cawl.

‘You imply they are incorrect?’

Cawl scratched his head. ‘Hmm, not exactly, but you should allow me to look over their data before you take anything other magi say as the given truth.’

‘Regardless, at the moment it appears crossing is possible, but that I will not be able to come back. Whether anyone can follow me is doubtful. Work must be completed on stabilising the Attilan Gate soon if we are to have our own route into Nihilus. Abaddon’s forces are running rampant with little opposition. Half the Imperium is depending on you, Cawl. Now, tell me how long it will take you.’

‘Only half the Imperium?’ said Cawl. ‘How disappointing.’

‘Please answer me, if you would,’ said Guilliman. He had a habit of becoming more courteous when vexed, Cawl had noticed. For a demigod he was capable of remarkable feats of passive aggression.

‘There are two answers to this question, my lord Guilliman, and it depends very much on your priorities. The first is if I continue to accompany your fleet, and partake in war at your side as I have been doing, I am confident that given a century or three I will have mastered much of the necron science at my current rate of progress.’

‘We do not have three hundred years to spare,’ said Guilliman.

‘Indeed no, which is why I said it – for effect, you see, because I must ask something difficult of you.’ He regretted again his choice of personality. ‘The second answer is that if you give me leave to depart, abandon my duties here, then I will learn what we must know to a more agreeable timescale.’

‘Details,’ Guilliman said. ‘Exact numbers.’

‘Exactitude is impossible, but it is certainly years rather than centuries,’ said Cawl. ‘Do you see? If I must work quickly, I have to leave you now, lord regent.’ He felt genuinely regretful. It had been most pleasing to see how successful his Primaris Space Marines had been, and even more gratifying to receive praise for it. ‘I must work alone, as I have so many times in the past. There are secrets I must uncover, techniques I must learn. It is a little quest for me!’ he said brightly. ‘I admit going it alone is very attractive at this time, because I am bored by my current endeavours, but I am not overemphasising the benefits of focus in order to regain my freedom of agency. It really will be quicker that way. The Primaris Space Marines have proven adequate. They work! I am no longer required. I have other work to attend to, more important work. It is best you let me go.’

Guilliman moved to speak.

‘Don’t say anything!’ said Cawl. He held up a hand. ‘I know it will be difficult for you to see me go, as you and I have such a close bond, and yes, of course, dear Roboute, you will miss my military genius, but you have thousands of other generals, who together match my ability.’ He grinned. ‘Almost.’

The regent looked at him for so long, Cawl initiated a chronometer to tally the seconds.

‘I have need of you here, Belisarius,’ he said eventually. ‘This armour restricts me. Only you have a true understanding of its workings. I was hoping we might discover a means for me to remove it.’

‘You cannot remove it, my lord,’ said Cawl. ‘Not yet. Maybe one day. I cannot help you with that particular question. It might be that if I stayed with the fleet we could discover a way, but would you rather I prioritise your comfort, or the fate of our species?’

Guilliman nodded slowly. ‘Very well.’

‘I can depart?’

‘You can depart. I expect regular reports, however, and if I ever have cause to summon you to return, you must do so promptly.’

‘Yes,’ said Cawl carefully. ‘About that. There remain difficulties with astropathic communication. It is not secure, with so many sorcerers about, and any complexity is lost to the tides of the warp, so I have devised a special creation that will enable us to hold discussions a little more directly. In fact, and forgive my boldness, I have taken the liberty of installing it already aboard this ship.’

‘So this must be a simple device, for you to have installed it so soon.’

‘Far from simple!’ said Cawl, his pride stung. ‘Ah, I see what you did there, my lord. Guilty. I have been thinking about this for a few years, I admit. I devised the machine some time ago. I have been waiting to reveal it at the germane moment.’

‘Do not manipulate me, Cawl. I do not like it.’

‘No manipulation, I promise, only forward thinking. There are other gifts! I am transferring most of my military assets to you. I don’t need hundreds of thousands of skitarii following me about and getting in the way, and as flattered as I am that an entire demi-household of House Taranis pledged themselves to me, Knight armours take up a lot of space, and aristocrats can be challenging to deal with day to day. So you can have them as well.’

‘They will be insulted.’

‘I am going to retain a lance of them. I’ll lay it on thick about secret missions and high honours. They love that kind of thing. Anyway, don’t you worry about me. I’m not planning any planetary invasions. Strictly research, and I shall retain enough personnel to ensure I am properly protected. I’m much too important to go out into the world without a few guns at my back.’

‘Seeing as you have planned this so perfectly, I am sure you are now going to tell me that you will depart immediately, in which case this is farewell.’

‘For now.’

‘Then go with my blessing,’ said Guilliman. ‘Before you do, transmit all data appertaining to this Pit of Raukos, and I will go about constructing a plausible strategy to take it.’

‘You agree then?’

‘Your manner is not always to my liking, Cawl, but you are rarely wrong. If you say you need this system, then it shall be done. I only hope that you will return the favour when asked.’

‘Good. I’m not going to go just yet,’ said Cawl. ‘I need to introduce you to our line of communication first. Then it will take me a few days to prepare all the necessaries.’

‘Introduce? Is it a man? Have you engineered some sort of monstrous astropath?’ Guilliman said in a condemnatory tone.

Cawl laughed uneasily, because he had considered doing exactly that, which was bad enough, and what he had actually done was considerably worse.

‘No, no, not at all, my lord. I am going to leave you with, shall we say, a little piece of myself. I call it the Cawl Inferior, and although I admit it sounds immodest, you are going to be extremely impressed by what I have done.’

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Chapter Forty-Seven

THE PROBLEM WITH VENGEANCE

MESSINIUS REMADE

DARK IMPERIUM

Sicarius stood guard as Roboute Guilliman looked upon the stars.

The view from the librarium took in a wide sweep of the eastern Ultima Segmentum. They were so close to home, it was easy to pick out the nearest systems in the Realm of Ultramar. Sicarius wondered how his gene-sire felt. Even after so much time with him, the primarch remained largely inscrutable. Was he pleased to see his kingdom and know it still prospered? Maybe. But Guilliman was rarely content. Sometimes a king would speak plainly to his lifeguards, and sometimes Guilliman spoke to Sicarius.

Sometimes he spoke of his errors.

Mistake had followed mistake, he had told Sicarius, one night. He broke the Legions. He humbled the Mechanicum. He created institutions that now threatened everything. His brothers' thirst for vengeance had propelled him into disaster, pursuing Fulgrim when he should have withdrawn. One cut of the traitor's sword had robbed the Imperium of its stability. While he languished in stasis, his brothers had vanished, wreaking damage on one institution or another through their rivalries, petty disputes and obsessions

before they were done. While he slept, the Imperium slipped from decline into ruin.

These things troubled the primarch, and so they troubled Sicarius.

If only I had not pursued Fulgrim, the primarch had said. *If only I had not broken the Legions. If only, if only, if only…*

It concerned Sicarius, that the last great hope of humanity should feel this way, to look upon the Imperium and see only the terminal wounds of his mistakes.

There was a polite cough behind them from Guilliman's equerry, Tanus. The primarch had started the habit of taking on promising Primaris Space Marines to act as his personal servants, one at a time, for no more than a year, soon after the crusade had begun. One day they might become leaders of mankind, and take humanity into more peaceful times. Realistically, he was forging them into capable war leaders. It never did to abandon old dreams entirely.

'What are we without hope?' the primarch said aloud.

'My lord?' Tanus said.

'Nothing. Old hopes die hard,' he said. 'There are new ones to take their place. You have something for me?'

'Lord Lieutenant Messinius is here, as you requested.'

'Is that so,' said Guilliman. The Armour of Fate purred as he turned away from the windows. 'Already?'

Tanus looked momentarily uncomfortable. 'You have been in meditation for two hours, my lord.'

This took Guilliman by surprise. Sicarius had noted the primarch's sense of time often escaped him years ago.

'Has he been waiting long?'

'Not long, lord regent.'

'Send him in, and apologise for the delay, if you would. How is he?'

'In pain.'

'Then I shall meet him in my librarium.'

'My lord.' Tanus bowed.

'Wait. Tanus, I have another errand for you. I hear the historitor Yassilli Sulymanya has joined the fleet with the remnants of Fleet Tertius.'

'I do not know, my lord.'

'Find out. I have an errand for her.'

‘My lord.’

Tanus departed.

‘Sicarius,’ the primarch said. ‘With me. I wish you to witness what I have to say to Messinius.’

‘My lord,’ said Sicarius. He followed, hand on sword as always.

They went through into the main body of the librarium. A few moments later, Messinius entered. He was without armour. Sicarius doubted Messinius could have worn it even if he had wished to. Surgical scars criss-crossed his body, following every major muscle group, as though he had been pulled apart and put back together. The cuts were clean, the stitches neat, but the number of the wounds meant he looked little like himself. Some of that unfamiliarity would decrease with the swelling, when the bruises that blotched every inch of his skin faded. Some changes were permanent. He was bigger, more heavily muscled. He moved awkwardly. Sicarius thought only pride stopped him from employing a cane. The rapid transformation of the Rubicon procedure took a heavy physical toll, even on the enhanced constitutions of the Adeptus Astartes.

‘Vitrian. You are healing,’ Guilliman said.

‘Barely, my lord,’ said Messinius. His voice was a gravelly whisper. ‘I am told the discomfort will pass soon enough.’

‘It will. I have seen it many times. Soon you will be mightier than ever you were. Rejoice, for you join the ranks of those you have led for these last years.’

‘Thanks to Cawl,’ said Messinius. He seemed uncertain. Sicarius had an insight that Messinius was not completely comfortable with the changes the archmagos had made. ‘I owe him thanks twice over. I would be dead without his monster.’

‘Then it is good Cawl breaks the rules sometimes,’ said Guilliman. ‘I have known many good men undergo the crossing. It rarely brings permanent disadvantage, should the subject survive. Do you know why it is called the Rubicon?’

‘No, my lord.’

The strain in Messinius’ voice made Sicarius properly look at him. Messinius was in no state to receive a lecture. He was trembling with the effort of standing to attention. His muscles had been filleted to take the sinew coils. These were cybernetic implants, and could not be grown in

situ. He must be in unbearable pain. Sicarius could have sworn he felt the heat coming off Messinius generated by the Belisarian Furnace, one of the new implants which granted Space Marines remarkable powers of recuperation. It would be working hard to heal all his many hurts, and that had a price of its own. Messinius should not have been on his feet. Sicarius' hand shifted on his sword. He had yet to undergo the process. He had known men who had died doing so, and looking at Messinius only made him more cautious.

Guilliman too saw Messinius' pain, and abandoned his story.

'Ancient history, truly ancient. I will relay the tale another time.' Guilliman attempted a smile. He gestured towards one of the chairs around his conference table, off at the side of the room. 'We have things to discuss, you and I.'

'The second matter you mentioned?'

'The second matter.'

Messinius glanced at Sicarius. Their eyes briefly locked.

'Cato will remain to bear witness. At least, so I have it. The truth is he will not leave my side. He does not believe the ship to be safe,' said Guilliman, trying and mostly failing to affect levity.

It is not safe, thought Sicarius, though he held his peace.

'Come, sit,' said Guilliman to Messinius. 'Be at ease. I see now I called on you too early. I apologise. I am so caught up in this endless war that I forget the better impulses of humanity.'

'It is only pain, my lord. It is of no consequence. To serve the Emperor is to embrace pain, and put it aside for His glory.'

'Your Chapter worshipped the Emperor, did they not?'

'They did,' said Messinius.

'Unusual among my sons.'

'It seemed obvious to us. He is so mighty He serves as a god to mankind.'

'You have not mentioned it before.' Guilliman helped him to a chair, and pulled it out for him. Messinius sat with evident relief. Sicarius remained where he was, watching from the shadows.

'We are not the Black Templars, my lord. Our veneration of the Emperor is similar in form to the cults of most other Chapters, it is only the nature of our faith that differs.'

Guilliman pulled out his own enormous chair, so heavily reinforced it was more akin to a monument than a piece of furniture. The scrape of its feet upon the stone floor echoed long around the empty bookshelves. High above, strange cyber-constructs stirred.

‘That is a fundamental difference,’ the primarch said.

‘It is. You do not approve?’

Guilliman looked away from the battered lord lieutenant. He let out a thoughtful breath.

‘I do not know. My father… The Emperor was deadly earnest that no man should worship him as a god. He was a complex being, hard to see, do you understand?’

‘I am not sure I follow your meaning.’

‘If you looked at him, you were never sure you were seeing the same person you saw the time before. To different men he appeared as different things. We pursued his policy, his Imperial Truth, with dogged fanaticism. I see this new world and I wonder if we were any better than the religions we destroyed. In the end, the Imperial Truth was a cover for a lie. There were gods after all, or things that called themselves gods. When I saw him again after my rebirth, in the palace, what I saw was so far from human.’

‘You have never spoken to me about what happened that day,’ said Messinius.

‘It is not for sharing. I will say no more, and you should be glad of that,’ said the primarch. Sicarius noted that. The primarch had not confided in him either. All he knew was that what the primarch had seen in the Throne Room troubled him, troubled him more than any of the rest of it.

The primarch rested his immense gauntlets upon the table. ‘So I do not know what I know, and if I am to be true to my ignorance, then who am I to judge the beliefs of other men?’ He smiled again.

Messinius looked so serious. Sicarius knew the primarch saw himself in him. He saw himself in them all. It made it hard for him to see them die.

‘There has been news from Ultramar. The Death Guard have increased their depredations. It is time for me to return home and deal with this issue personally. The Adeptus Mechanicus has lent my people a great deal of aid, but the Ultramarines are scattered across the galaxy, and the other forces of the region are sorely beset. Something is about to happen there of grave importance.’

‘What do you think is going to happen?’

‘I believe my brother Mortarion may be about to make his presence known,’ said Guilliman. ‘He has yet to reveal himself openly in this new galaxy of ours. He is out there, somewhere. They will all come back, I am sure. Magnus is already active. Mortarion, Angron, Fulgrim… All of them. Mortarion always hated the purity of Ultramar. If he creeps out of the warp, it will be there, to spite me personally. It is where his sons have been most active, after all. I am sure you can understand my desire not to see his filth spread across my realm, after Sabatine.’

Messinius swallowed with difficulty, and nodded. ‘I understand.’

Guilliman had more detailed reports of the horror that had occurred on Sabatine. Sicarius had seen them. He did not intend to share them with Messinius. Space Marines had hard hearts, but they were not immune to sorrow, especially those like Messinius, who retained more human sensibilities than most. He still possessed the ability to suffer. He had empathy for others. Sicarius could not decide if that made him weak, or admirable.

Guilliman gestured at a pile of documents on his desk.

‘We have this problem now. The Nephilim Anomaly, the Pariah Nexus, call it what you will. We have achieved only a little of what we set out to do. Kallides will be joined by other battle groups, but the pylon network remains. We have failed here, Vitrian, but I cannot afford to linger to resolve this problem now. It appears we lack the power to penetrate far into this zone, so I have decided on a new strategy. We shall stop this place from growing. We shall hunt out necron sentinel worlds along its periphery. We shall remain vigilant for their movements, and when they move to seed a new pylon complex, we shall be waiting for them. Ironically for them, their efforts to banish the effects of the warp will aid us in this task. Where the field is weak, the warp is accessible, and it is calm. Communication and travel are both significantly easier in this place.’

Messinius was passive. The man was trusting. Sicarius was sure he had an inkling what would be asked of him, but his face betrayed nothing. Stoic, accepting, obedient, loyal – like Sicarius. Like the primarch and all his sons.

‘I am to establish a fleet here. The remains of Fleet Tertius will be supported by significant elements of Fleets Quintus and Sextus. All assets

will retain their current designations, but all will be under the command of a single person. This person will seek out necron worlds on the edge of the zone and raze them. They will intercept efforts to expand the zone. They will lend help to any battle groups I may decide to send into the zone. They will plan and execute missions to destroy targets of opportunity within the zone, especially if such actions will weaken the effects of the stilling. They will intercept any attempts by necron fleets to break out. They will watch the marches of this strange and terrible country, while I deal with threats elsewhere, and when the time is right I shall return to tear out this canker from the flesh of our Imperium.'

Guilliman rose.

'I must ask you to kneel before me, Vitrian Messinius. It will hurt, but I would do this correctly.'

Stiffly, the lord lieutenant got up from his chair and lowered himself onto one knee. He grunted with effort when he bowed his head.

'Vitrian Messinius, Lord Lieutenant of the Indomitus Crusade, Tenth Captain of the White Consuls Adeptus Astartes Chapter, I hereby name you Fleetmaster of Crusade Fleet Tertius, and Warden of the Nephilim Sector. Do you accept?'

'If that is what you will have me do, my lord, then that is what shall be done. I accept this role freely, and with all my will. I promise to serve you unto death.'

'You have witnessed this, Cato?'

'Witnessed, my lord.'

'Good, now rise, Vitrian. You may sit again.'

Messinius did as he was bidden.

'I shall leave you with appropriate resources to achieve these objectives, and the power to requisition more if and when the need arises.' Guilliman unrolled a scroll, revealing an ornately written deed. He spread his fingers and pinned it flat. 'This is a deed of grant for a new Chapter planet for your brotherhood. It will be their base of operations. You may operate from there if you wish. I shall leave the detail to you.'

'Thank you for this great honour, my lord,' said Messinius, and lowered his eyes humbly.

'Serve me well, Messinius. Humanity is depending on you.'

Guilliman gave him a stern look. Sicarius imagined he was hoping this man would be capable of what he required. There were no other primarchs, no others like Guilliman himself. The burden of saving humanity fell on lesser men. Sicarius himself had a glimmer of hope that if they could find enough warriors of Messinius' quality, then all was not lost.

The primarch spoke again.

'Go now and rest, Vitrian. When you are recovered, you shall begin the greatest labour of your life. I will ask everything of you, and with good cause, for it is only with the help of men like you that I can save this Dark Imperium.'

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Notes on the Crusade:
Further Reading

For this final instalment of our Notes on the Crusade series, we thought it would be a good idea to take you out of the 41st millennium and back into our own 3rd millennium.

The Dawn of Fire series is but part of the story of the Indomitus Crusade. There are, in fact, many books set in the Era Indomitus. Sadly, we can't list them all, but presented below, in chronological order, are the novels with direct links to Dawn of Fire, those that follow a character who has a large role to play in the series, or those which feature other major events that have significant bearing on the period.

Exciting stories await you…

Vaults of Terra: The Carrion Throne

Chris Wraight

Before the opening of the Great Rift, Inquisitor Erasmus Crowl uncovers a conspiracy that will lead him to a terrible secret – one that threatens the entire Imperium.

The Fall of Cadia

Robert Rath

The Warmaster Abaddon launches his 13th Black Crusade, shattering the fortress world of Cadia and the network of xenos pylons that have held the Eye of Terror back, and unleashing the Cicatrix Maledictum on the galaxy.

Vaults of Terra: The Hollow Mountain

Chris Wraight

As the Noctis Aeterna approaches Terra, Inquisitor Crowl continues his investigations into the threat to the Golden Throne.

Watchers of the Throne: The Emperor's Legion

Chris Wraight

Roboute Guilliman returns to Terra as the Great Rift splits the galaxy in two. As the Second Siege of Terra looms, a daemonic army descends on the Imperial Palace and the Custodians' Edict of Restraint will be tested.

The Lords of Silence

Chris Wraight

Sabatine, the home world of the White Consuls, falls under attack from the Death Guard. Captain Vitrian Messinius fights not only for the survival of his home world, but of his entire Chapter.

Dawn of Fire: Avenging Son

Guy Haley

Guilliman's Indomitus Crusade begins. The primarch reforms the Senate Imperialis and begins a massive war of reconquest. Key to this endeavour is Belisarius Cawl, archmagos dominus of the Adeptus Mechanicus, who unveils Guilliman's secret weapon – the Primaris Space Marines.

Minka Lesk: The Last Whiteshield

Justin D Hill

Whiteshield Minka Lesk rises through the ranks, as she and the other Cadian Shock Troopers continue to fight and learn what it means to be

Cadian in the wake of their home planet's destruction. Their numbers may be diminished, but the Cadian spirit is not.

Knights of Macragge

Nick Kyme

Cato Sicarius is dispatched to Macragge with new Primaris tech for the Ultramarines, only to become lost in the warp on the way. He is believed dead, but returns many years later, after saving a feudal world.

Void King

Marc Collins

Tasked by Guilliman to find crossings into Imperium Nihilus, rogue trader dynasties flock together to earn a grand prize for doing so – but not all of them have the Imperium's best interests at heart.

Dawn of Fire: The Gate of Bones

Andy Clark

Messages have begun to arrive from Imperium Nihilus, proving that the Imperium persists beyond the Rift. Fleet Primus attacks Gathalamor to secure the warp nexus there. The sorcerer Tenebrus constructs a psy-weapon: the Gift of Bucharis.

Watchers of the Throne: The Regent's Shadow

Chris Wraight

Custodian Valerian and Sister Aleya tackle a plot to seize control of the Imperium in the name of the Static Tendency, a group who wish to return to the status quo as it was before Guilliman came to Terra.

Ephrael Stern: The Heretic Saint

David Annandale

Having learned of the threat posed by the Pariah Nexus, Guilliman has dispatched Battle Group Kallides to investigate. It is joined by Ephrael Stern, the so-called Heretic Saint.

Dawn of Fire: The Wolftime

Gav Thorpe

Roboute Guilliman must convince Great Wolf Logan Grimnar to join with him, and use his reinforced Chapter to suppress the ork migrations taking place on the border of the Segmentums Solar and Pacificus.

Vaults of Terra: The Dark City

Chris Wraight

In the drukhari city of Commorragh, Crowl and his companions are caught up in a blasphemous effort to save the failing Golden Throne.

Dawn of Fire: Throne of Light

Guy Haley

The arch-heretic Kor Phaeron learns of a possible threat in the form of a sacred child. Inquisitor Rostov, who has been pursuing a sinister group known as the Hand of Abaddon, learns of it too. Their investigations lead Rostov and Phaeron to the astropathic relay world of Srinagar.

Dawn of Fire: The Iron Kingdom

Nick Kyme

Faced with impossible demands from the Indomitus Crusade, the Iron Kingdom rises up in revolt against Imperial rule, imperilling the creation of the Anaxian Line.

Dawn of Fire: The Martyr's Tomb

Marc Collins

At Guilliman's command, the rogue trader Katla Helvintr joins an effort to find a second route across the Cicatrix Maledictum.

Dawn of Fire: The Sea of Souls

Chris Wraight

While taking part in the deadly warfare around the Eye of Terror, the Imperial warship *Judgement of the Void* finds itself bearing a strange and

dangerous cargo.

Indomitus
Gav Thorpe

Ultramarines taking part in Battle Group Kallides' assault on the Pariah Nexus face an overwhelming threat.

Dawn of Fire: The Hand of Abaddon
Nick Kyme

Inquisitor Rostov tracks down the Hand of Abaddon to a hidden Blackstone Fortress. He learns that the group plan to reforge a terrible weapon from the time of the Horus Heresy.

Huron Blackheart: Master of the Maelstrom
Mike Brooks

The master of the Red Corsairs faces a mutiny within his own ranks when a rival captures Guilliman's flagship *Macragge's Honour* during the Terran Crusade.

Dawn of Fire: The Silent King
Guy Haley

Roboute Guilliman turns his attention to the necrons rising in the Pariah Nexus.

Dark Imperium
Guy Haley

Twelve years after the opening of the Cicatrix Maledictum, Guilliman faces an even greater threat. The traitor primarch Mortarion returns to personally lead his armies against Ultramar.

Dark Imperium: Plague War
Guy Haley

The Plague Wars rage the length and breadth of Guilliman's kingdom. The primarch must retake his lost territory in the Spear of Espandor campaign as Ultramar is wracked with disease and despoliation.

Dark Imperium: Godblight

Guy Haley

The destinies of primarch and Imperial Regent Roboute Guilliman and his traitorous brother Mortarion come together for the climactic battle of the Plague Wars, which will see the historitor Fabian Guelphrain learn a disturbing truth about his lord, and Guilliman wrestle with questions of his father's divinity.

Belisarius Cawl: The Great Work

Guy Haley

In the wake of the Great Rift, Belisarius Cawl turns his attention to the abandoned world of Sotha. Once home to the Scythes of the Emperor, it also hides a long-buried secret… and an ancient evil that could see the Imperium burn.

Genefather

Guy Haley

Cawl continues his efforts to learn the secrets of the necron pylon network, and is confronted by Fabius Bile.

The Devastation of Baal

Guy Haley

Baal is besieged as the horror of Hive Fleet Leviathan reaches the Blood Angels home world. Led by Commander Dante, the sons of Sanguinius battle for the fate of their bloodline.

The Lion: Son of the Forest

Mike Brooks

Lion El'Jonson awakens alone on a distant world. Believing the Imperium long dead, he fights to rid Imperium Nihilus of the nightmares that rule it. But not all is as the primarch of the First Legion believes.

OTHER RECOMMENDED TITLES:

Uriel Ventris: Swords of Calth
by Graham McNeill

Creed: Ashes of Cadia
by Jude Reid

Renegades: Harrowmaster
by Mike Brooks

Rites of Passage
by Mike Brooks

Morvenn Vahl: Spear of Faith
by Jude Reid

Steel Tread
by Andy Clark

The Horusian Wars: Resurrection
by John French

Pilgrims of Fire
by Justin D Hill

Longshot
by Rob Young

Assassinorum: Kingmaker
by Robert Rath

Leviathan
by Darius Hinks

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Guy Haley is the author of the Siege of Terra novel *The Lost and the Damned*, as well as the Horus Heresy novels *Titandeath*, *Wolfsbane* and *Pharos*, and the Primarchs novels *Konrad Curze: The Night Haunter*, *Corax: Lord of Shadows* and *Perturabo: The Hammer of Olympia*. He has also written many Warhammer 40,000 novels, including the Dawn of Fire books *Avenging Son* and *Throne of Light*, as well as *Belisarius Cawl: The Great Work*, *Genefather*, the Dark Imperium trilogy, *The Devastation of Baal*, *Dante*, *Darkness in the Blood* and *Astorath: Angel of Mercy*. For Age of Sigmar he has penned the Drekki Flynt novels *The Arkanaut's Oath* and *The Ghosts of Barak-Minoz* as well as many other stories. He lives in Yorkshire with his wife and son.

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An extract from *The Infinite and the Divnie*.

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Before the being called the Emperor revealed Himself, before the rise of the aeldari, before the necrontyr traded their flesh for immortal metal, the world was born in violence.

And despite everything that would happen, this violence was more terrible than any the world later witnessed. For sweeping battlefronts are nothing compared to the torture of geologic change, and no warhead – no matter how large – can equal a billion years of volcanic upheaval.

It was a nameless world, for no one yet lived there to name it.

Ice sheets tall as a battle cruiser expanded and retreated. Tectonic plates ground continents together, their collision pushing up mountain ridges like teeth in the gums of a child. In the world's great ocean, an undersea volcano spewed white-hot magma into the darkness of the oceanic floor, gradually building an island. Then another. The oceanic plate moved across the hotspot, carrying the created islands north-west as the volcanic boil continued to vent itself into the cold, black water. A long archipelago formed, like the dot-dash of an ancient code running across the jewelled blue of the sea.

The first civilisations rose around these islands, in a manner of speaking.

Microorganisms ruled the warm waters, their battle for survival as worthy as any that would come after. But their struggles, their triumphs and their cannibalisms went unremarked – even by the organisms themselves. Sentience was an unneeded complication.

Then came the great city-builders. Colonies of coral polyps that erected great funnel towers, branching architectural lattices in green and magenta, cities full of life and activity.

And like every great civilisation, they built upon the skeletons of those that had come before. Layer upon layer, each generation withering and ossifying, so the living stood unthinking upon a vast necropolis of their predecessors.

Perhaps the fish that weaved through these great reefs were the first sentient beings on the world. They had little emotion other than fear, pain and hunger, yet their arrival presaged a new era – no longer was life there a march of unfeeling organisms that existed in order to exist. They could now perceive.

When the great lizards emerged from the water, the struggle became one of legs and muscle and hearts beating blood fast through strong chambers. And though these great lizards were little more intelligent than the fish, they felt. They felt the pleasure of hot blood on their tongues, the agony of a festering wound, and maternal protectiveness. They died in great numbers, rotting corpses ground and crushed by geological processes into the diamonds and crude oil that other beings would, in time, murder each other to possess.

And a few, just a few, would enter a state of deathless preservation. Trapped in silt and unable to fully decay, the calcium of their bones replaced atom by atom with rock until they were but stone skeletons. Immortal in form, yet with nothing of their bodies remaining. A mockery of the vital living creatures they once were.

Life on the nameless world continued this way for billions of years, unheeded by the rest of the galaxy.

Then one night, a saurian scavenger sniffed the wind, sensing something had changed. Pointing her long snout towards the sky, she took in a sight that had never been encountered there before.

New stars burned in the rainbow smear of the sky. Points of light that clustered together with unnatural regularity. Lights that glowed with balefires, green as the island canopies, and moved across the sky as clouds did.

To the scavenger’s rudimentary brain, strange visual information like this could only be a hallucination brought on by consuming one of the island’s poisonous plants. Her body triggered a purge reflex, vomiting egg yolk and root plants before she darted for the twisted labyrinth of ground trees.

As the scavenger watched, judging the threat, the lights descended. The creatures were large, with great sickle wings swept forward and bodies so

black they barely stood out against the night.

Like any who survived on the island, the scavenger knew a predator when she saw one.

Cold emerald light spilled from the creatures' bellies, and the scavenger detected the foreign scent of sand baked into glass.

Two-legged creatures stepped out of the emanation, feet shattering the plate of fused beach. Starlight glinted off their bodies like sun on the sea, and their eyes burned the same green as the lights on the flying predators.

The world would be nameless no longer.

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Aeldari World of Cepharil, Eastern Fringe
Ten Thousand Years Before the Great Awakening

Ancient stories, passed from the lips of spirit-singer to spirit-singer, held that anyone who touched the stone would burn.

Thy hand shall curl and turn black
Thy back-teeth glow white-hot
Thy bones crack like fire-logs
For I have drunk from elder suns

The songs held that the gemstone was a meteorite. Wandering, semi-sentient. Absorbing the energy of each star it passed. During the War in Heaven, it was said that warriors had used it to channel the gods themselves.

Trazyn, however, had learned long ago not to believe the absurdities of aeldari folklore. Ancient though their race was, they were still given to the follies of an organic brain.

Trazyn had travelled the galaxy for so long he'd forgotten what year he'd started. Collecting. Studying. Ordering the cultures of the cosmos.

And one thing he'd learned was that every society thought their mountain was special. That it was more sacred than the mountain worshipped by their neighbouring tribe. That it was the one true axis of the universe.

Even when informed that their sacred ridge was merely the random connection of tectonic plates, or their blessed sword a very old but relatively common alien relic – a revelation they universally did not appreciate, he found – they clung to their stories.

Which is not to say there were not gods in the firmament, of course. Trazyn knew there were, because he had helped kill them. But he'd also found that most of what societies took to be gods were inventions of their own, charmingly fanciful, imaginations.

But though he did not believe the gem channelled ancient gods, that did not mean it wasn't worth having – or worth the aeldari protecting.

Indeed, the sounds of a siege echoed through the bone halls.

Trazyn allowed a portion of his consciousness to stray, if only to monitor the situation. Part of his mind worked the problem at hand, the other looked through the oculars of his lychguard captain.

Through the being's eyes, Trazyn saw that his lychguard phalanx still held the gates of the temple. Those in the front rank had locked their dispersion shields in a wall, each raising their hyperphase sword like the hammer of a cocked pistol. Behind them, those in the second rank held their warscythes as spears, thrusting them over the shoulders of their comrades so the entire formation bristled with humming blades.

Perfectly uniform, Trazyn noticed. And perfectly still.

Exodite bodies littered the steps before them – feather-adorned mesh armour split with surgical-straight lines, limbs and heads detached. His olfactory sensors identified particles of cooked muscle in the air.

Another attack was massing. In the garden plaza before the temple, where five dirt streets converged, aeldari Exodites flitted between decorative plants and idols carved from massive bones.

In the distance, he could see the lumbering form of a great lizard, long necked and powerful, with twin prism cannons slung on its humped back. Trazyn marked it as a target for the two Doom Scythes flying a support pattern overhead.

Shuriken rounds swept in, rattling the necron shields like sleet on a windowpane. One disc sailed into the ocular cavity of a lychguard and lodged there, bisecting the grim fire of his eye. The warrior did not react. Did not break formation. With a shriek of protesting metal, the living alloy of his skull forced the monomolecular disc free and it fluttered to the steps like a falling leaf.

Trazyn looked at the pattern of it through the captain's vision. Circular, with double spiral channels. A common aeldari design, not worth acquiring.

He sensed a change in the air and looked up to see the first Doom Scythe streaking down in an attack run. At the last moment the great lizard heard it, rotating around its serpentine head to stare at the incoming comet.

A beam of white-hot energy lanced from the Doom Scythe's fuselage, tracing a line of flame through the lush undergrowth. It passed through the creature's long neck and the top third of it fell like a cut tree branch. The great body staggered, heeled, stayed upright. Then the next Doom Scythe lanced it through the midsection and set off the payload on its prism cannons. Cascading detonations tore the creature apart, the purple energy blast throwing the weapons crew hundreds of cubits away.

Pity, Trazyn thought as he watched the carcass burn. *I wanted one of those.*

But he had no time for such side projects. Conch shell horns sounded across the rainforest-girdled spires of the city, and already he could see more great lizards lumbering towards the temple. One rotated a twin-barrelled shuriken cannon towards the sky and began spitting fire at the retreating Scythes. Though they were primitive, once the Exodites marshalled their numbers his small acquisition force would be overwhelmed.

Cepharil was awakening to defend its World Spirit.

Trazyn left the lychguard captain's body, rejoined his consciousness, and focused on the task at hand.

Before him stretched a long wraithbone corridor, likely salvaged from whatever craftworld these fundamentalists had used to begin their self-imposed exile. Bas-relief carvings depicting the society's exodus, fashioned from the bones of the great lizards, decorated the walls.

Trazyn had been scrying for traps, detecting pressure plates and a huge mechanical fulcrum hidden in the masonry. Beyond that waited the cyclopean gates of the inner chamber.

He finished his calculations and saw the way through.

Trazyn picked up his empathic obliterator and strode into the corridor.

Eyeholes in the bas-reliefs coughed, sending clouds of bone darts clattering off his necrodermis. Trazyn snatched one out of the air and analysed the tip: an exotic poison derived from a local marine invertebrate, unique to this world.

He slipped it into a dimensional pocket and continued forward, sensing a stone shift and sink beneath him.

A piece of masonry, hammer-shaped and weighing six tons, swept down at him like a pendulum. Trazyn waved at it without stopping, the stasis projection from his palm emitter halting its progress mid-swing. He passed it without a glance, its surface vibrating with potential energy.

Finally, the gate. Tall as a monolith, it was decorated with exquisite carvings of aeldari gods. A vertical strip of runes laid out a poem-riddle so fiendish, it would stop even the wisest if they did not know the obscure lore of the–

'*Tailliac sawein numm*,' intoned Trazyn, turning sideways so he could slip through the gates as they ground open.

Normally, he would have put some effort into it. Solved it by thought, then performed a textual analysis. Trazyn enjoyed riddles. They revealed so much about the cultures that shaped them. But a noemic notice from his lychguards suggested that the Exodites were pressing harder than anticipated. No time for amusing diversions.

He hadn't paused to process the meaning of the runes, just fed them through his lexigraphic database and cross-referenced double meanings, inferences and mythological connotations. Even now, he could not have explained what the answer to the riddle was, or what it meant. It was merely a linguistic equation, a problem with an answer.

An answer that had brought him into the presence of the World Spirit.

The chamber swept up around him like a cavernous grotto, its upper reaches lost in the echoing vaults of the ceiling. His metal feet sounded off a causeway, its wraithbone marbled with veins of gold. Filigreed balustrades on either side mimicked the corals of the ocean depths, for Cepharil was a world of warm seas and lush archipelagos. On either side of the walkway, pools of liquid platinum cast watery light across the walls.

'Now,' he muttered to himself. 'Where are you, my lovely?'

Before him rose the World Spirit.

It curved ahead, inlayed into the vaulted surface of the far wall. It too was made of bone, but rather than the old, inert wraithbone of the walls and ceiling this sprouted alive from the floor, branching like a fan of tree roots that had grown up instead of down.

No, Trazyn corrected, that was not quite accurate. His oculars stripped away the outer layers of the World Spirit, refocusing on the veins of energy that ran through the psychoactive material. Arcane power pulsed to and fro

in a circulatory system, racing through arteries and nerves as it travelled to the highest forks of the network and back to the floor. Not roots, then – antlers. Yes, that was it, a great set of antlers, large as a mountain, the points of its forks curving away from the wall. Here and there it sprouted buds, fuzzy with new growth.

Exquisite.

Stepping closer, Trazyn appraised the object. The substance was not wraithbone, he noted, at least not entirely. This was a hybrid, a substitute, grown from the skeletons of the great lizards and interwoven with the psycho-plastic wraithbone salvaged from their crashed ship. A gene-sequence scry failed to find where one substance began and the other ended, no points where the ancient craftsman had fused or grafted the two materials together. This was a seamless blend, nurtured and shaped over millions of years, wraithbone woven between the molecules of reactive, but lower quality, dinosaurid remains. A masterwork by one of the finest bonesingers in the galaxy, an act of artistry and devotion that was at once temple, mausoleum and metropolis. A place for the souls of his slain aeldari ancestors to be at rest, united and safeguarded from the hungry gods of the aether.

Trazyn carried towards it on tireless legs, craning his hunched neck to see where the highest forks disappeared in the darkness of the vault. Once, his own kind had been able to accomplish works such as this. But the process of biotransference, the blighted gift that had moved their consciousness to deathless metal bodies, had also burned away nearly all artistry. His kind were no longer artisans or poets. Those few that retained the knack found their powers diminished. Now they forged rather than created. A work that took this much care, this much love, was beyond them.

Such a shame he could not take the whole thing.

Given time he could extract it, perhaps even lock the entire temple in a stasis field and transplant it whole to his historical gallery on Solemnace. To have the gemstone in its original context would be a rare coup. But somehow these primitives had sensed the coming of his acquisition phalanx, and there was no time. In truth, he had broken protocol by waking even thirty of the lychguard before their time. Doing so had damaged their neural matrices, making them little more than automatons that followed tactical programs and explicit commands.

But if they could not remember this expedition, so much the better – Trazyn was not supposed to be here anyway.

He approached the base of the World Spirit – the chamber was a full league across – and beheld the true genius of its creation.

The structure sprouted from the skull of a predator lizard twice Trazyn's height, its lower jaw removed and sickle-like upper teeth buried in the wraithbone floor. A glow, like the orange light cast by wind-stoked embers, emanated from the cavities of the creature's eye sockets.

Trazyn's vision stripped away layers of bone and he saw the gemstone embedded in the predator's fist-sized brain cavity.

'A carnosaur. Astonishing.'

He brushed a metal hand over the skull's cranium, an emitter in the palm casting electromagnetic radiation through its core.

It was old. Older than he had thought possible. Indeed, perhaps Trazyn should have tempered his dismissal of the aeldari tales, for it was indeed a meteorite, and one of extreme antiquity and unknown make-up. He reviewed the spectromantic divination results manually, to confirm its findings. Given the age of the components, their degradation, and the style on the beam-cut faces of the gem, it was entirely possible that it dated from the War in Heaven.

A delicious shiver passed through Trazyn's circuitry.

'Well met, my dear,' he said, his cooing tone offset by the hollow echo of his vocal emitter. 'It is not so often that I meet a thing as old as I am.'

He was so entranced, in fact, that he did not see the dragon riders coming.

Deep focus tended to dim his circumspection protocols, and the beasts' footfalls had been masked via training and sorcery.

And for all his inputs, scryers, protocols and diviners, the movements of the empyrean were muffled in his senses. When it came to warp sorcery, he was like a deaf man at a dinner table, able to make out words through dampened sounds and lip-reading, but unable to even notice the voices behind his back.

An interstitial alert flashed in his vision and he wheeled, dialling back his chronosense to slow the world and give himself time to calculate a microsecond decision.

Scales, claws and sawtooth fangs were about to break down on him like a wave – twenty cavalry riding knee to knee in tight formation, wraithbone

lances braced, tattooed swirls on arrowhead-sharp faces. Scrimshawed charms dangled from the halters of their raptor mounts, each leather harness crisscrossing a scaled snout that ended in flared nostrils and hooked teeth. The raptors – underwater slow in Trazyn's enhanced vision – swung their avian frames low, shifting weight to their bunched haunches in preparation for a final lunge.

One lance came at him so directly, its tip looked like a circle in his vision.

Minimal options, none attractive. But his proximity to the World Spirit had at least given him a moment to act as they pulled their charge, afraid of smashing into their venerated ancestral tomb.

Trazyn slid left, past the first lance tip.

Before the warrior could swing the long weapon around, Trazyn gripped the haft and tore the tattooed Aspect Warrior from his saddle. He watched the rider's face twist as he fell from the mount, long hair flying free and hands sheltering his face as he tumbled to the bone floor.

Trazyn, who is called Infinite, a voice said. It was not audible speech. Nor was it telepathy, to which he was immune. Instead, it was a wavelength of psychic pulses pushing on his auditory transducer to mimic language. One of these riders must be a farseer.

He ignored it.

The riderless raptor struck at him, jaws closing on the place where his ribcage met his hooded neck. Trazyn had overcommitted himself and could not dodge.

You will not keep what you seek.

Hooked teeth met the cold surface of his necrodermis – and shattered.

Trazyn channelled kinetic force into his fist and punched the dinosaur in the throat.

Vertebrae popped, cartilage tore. The raptor went down with the noise of a bugle player experiencing sudden and unbearable agony.

Listen to the song. This world sings for the blood of Trazyn.

And it was true – even through the syrupy haze of slowed time he could hear the keening chants of the knights. That he did not have blood was no matter, these aeldari wanted it anyway.

But their formation was not optimised to deal with a single opponent. It was jumbling, folding as the knights tried to get to him. And he had just created a gap.

As the unit tried to wheel on itself, Trazyn slipped through the hole in the line – making sure to step on the fallen warrior on his way through.

Behind him, riders collided and mixed.

'Aeldari,' he scoffed. 'So old and wise. You are children to us.'

This World Spirit is our ancestry, Trazyn. Our culture. Our dead. And it will wither without the Solar Gem.

That's when Trazyn saw the carnosaur. He'd missed it before now, his focus overwhelmed by the charging raptor riders and senses clouded by witchery. It reared above him, its well-muscled chest protected by a breastplate shaped from dinosaurid bone, twin-linked shuriken cannons emerging like tusks from its chin. Serrated blades fashioned from the teeth of aquatic predators studded the armour plates clamped to its feet and spine. A calcium scythe capped its lashing tail.

And on its back, the farseer – her willow-thin face half-covered by the mask of an unfamiliar god, graceful frame armoured in mother-of-pearl, and pink hair gathered into a topknot.

We have long known that you desire it, but if you take it, the World Spirit will die.

'If you knew I was coming,' Trazyn said. 'You should have made a contingency plan.'

I know you will return, the farseer said. *But I will still enjoy this.*

The carnosaur bit down on him at the waist, his whole upper half trapped inside the wet darkness of its mouth. Nine-inch fangs – even now, he could not stop analysing, cataloguing – sank into the tough tubes and pelvic ambulation structures of his torso. Vital systems tore and failed. Emerald sparks erupted from the wound, lighting the interior of the carnosaur's mouth with baleful flashes. He felt his legs separate.

Trazyn channelled his diminishing reserves into a fist and reshaped it into a brutal spike. He stabbed at the carnosaur's lashing tongue, hot reptilian blood spurting over his oculars. To his annoyance, his systems autonomously ran an analysis of the genetic make-up.

He marked it to read later.

The muscular tongue flipped and rolled him to the side. He sprawled, saw a sawtooth strip of light as the jaws opened.

He regretted slowing his chronosense as he watched the row of jagged teeth close on him, puncturing his oculars, driving through his neural fibre

spools and crushing his skull.

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